“slave over epic”: (Re)presenting Voice and Negotiating Nationalism in George Elliott Clarke’s *Canticles I*

Ashley Thorup

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

George Elliott Clarke's ongoing, multi-volume epic, *Canticles I*, engages canonical and minority racial narratives in order to create a discursive space for (re)presentations of voice. As an epic, *Canticles I* utilizes many of its traditional structural markers; however, it largely revises and adapts them in order to suit its postcolonial project. The collection, though international in scope given its mapping of transatlantic movement, also negotiates with issues of nationalism, particularly in recognizing the effects of diaspora on the multicultural mosaic of Canada and confronting Canada's long-disregarded history of slavery. This thesis examines how *Canticles I* evokes postcolonial poetics within the framework of the traditional epic mode, how it participates in canon reformation through the reconstruction of voice, and how it contributes to the Canadian, and more specifically, African-Canadian, literary project. Beyond a close analysis of *Canticles I*, this thesis also identifies a recognizable gap in literary scholarship regarding African-Canadian literature – one that Clarke similarly aims to fill, both through his critical and creative writing.

Résumé

L'épopée en plusieurs volumes de George Elliott Clarke, *Canticles I*, prend parti des récits raciaux canoniques et minoritaires afin de créer un espace discursif voué aux (re)présentations de la voix. En tant qu'épopée, *Canticles I* utilise plusieurs marqueurs structurels traditionnels du genre, mais révisés et adaptés en grande partie pour s'harmoniser avec son projet postcolonial. La collection, bien que d'envergure internationale compte tenu son traçage des migrations transatlantiques, entre en dialogue également avec les questions de nationalisme, notamment en reconnaissant les effets de la diaspora sur la mosaïque multiculturelle du Canada et en soulevant l'histoire longtemps ignorée de l'esclavage au Canada. Cette thèse examine comment *Canticles I* évoque la poétique postcoloniale dans le cadre du mode épique traditionnel, comment il participe à la réforme canonique par la reconstruction de la voix, et comment il contribue au projet littéraire canadien, et plus spécifiquement afro-canadien. Outre l'analyse approfondie de *Canticles I*, cette thèse illumine également une lacune identifiable dans les études littéraires concernant la littérature afro-canadienne - une lacune que Clarke vise à combler, tant par le biais de son écriture critique que créative.

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Introduction

As a creative writer, George Elliott Clarke has consistently published in several genres: verse collections – *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983) and *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile* (1994); a verse-novel – *Whylah Falls* (1990); two verse plays – *Whylah Falls: The Play* (2000) and *Beatrice Chancy* (1990), the latter of which was adapted for the opera stage premiering in 1998; and multiple collections of poetry such as *Provençal Songs* (1993 and 1997), *Execution Poems* (2001)*, Blue* (2001)*, Black* (2005), and now *Canticles I* (2015 and 2016). This partial list demonstrates Clarke's level of mastery in multiple genres and styles and highlights the thematic continuity between many of his works. For example, *Whylah Falls* and *Execution Poems* are situated within the geographical domains of "Africadia," which Clarke defines as the merging of *Africa* and *Acadia*; it is a "Black Nova Scotia, an African-American-founded 'nation' [that] has flourished for two or more centuries" (Clarke, *Fire on the Water* 9). Additionally, *Black* finds its precedents in both *Execution Poems* and *Blue* – the former collection for its historical telling of the hangings of George and Rufus Hamilton in 1949, and the later suite of poems as an extension of Clarke's race and colour series, *Black* and *Blue*. Clarke's newest and ongoing project, *Canticles I* (2016 and 2017), develops many of the themes explored in his earlier works, particularly ideas about the nature of history, the canon, and the African-Canadian experience. The early conception of Clarke's epic project, *Canticles I*, is palpable in his 1998 interview with Anne Compton when he outlines the methodology behind his writing:

> … part of my strategy as a writer, in responding to my status as the scribe of a marginal and colonized community, is to sack and plunder all those larger literatures – British, American, Canadian, French, African-American, Caribbean – and to domesticate their

> authors and their most famous or noted lines. In other words, my acts of homage are acts of damage. (143)

Likewise, in *Canticles I*, Clarke engages with the larger subjects of history and the canon, "writing in black-and-white" to comment upon the task of inscribing African-Canadian absences into pre-existing archives (*MMXVII* ix).

Canticles I is divided into two volumes based on their respective years of collation: *MMXVI* and *MMXVII*. The earlier collection is 447 pages long, while the latter collection is 455 pages long. The cover bindings of both collections are polarizing in color: the 2016 edition's is black with white typography, while the 2017 edition's is white with black typography. This choice is deliberate, as it further elucidates Clarke's emphasis that the project is one written in "black-and-white." Each volume opens with two quotes on beauty and the task of (re)writing, which complement each other and set the precedent for the content of *Canticles I* as a whole. The 2016 volume includes a quote from William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, "Beauty is a defiance of authority," and from Walt Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "The greatest poet … drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet" (v). The 2017 collection includes a quote from Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, "It will be rewritten by black pamphleteers, History will be revised…" and Herbert Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation*, "The beautiful would be an essential quality of their freedom" (v). From the onset, Clarke introduces the reader to a sample of appropriated voices and themes that govern *Canticles I*, or, as he calls it, Testament I. The primary subject of Testament I, issued in two parts, is principally *History*:

> … of slavery and the resistance to enslavement; of imperialism and the struggle for independence from the control of European (and American) systems of governance; and

> also of the image or symbolism of the 'Negro' or 'black' in the Euro-Caucasian and pseudo-Christian Occident. (Clarke ix)

In tandem with his earlier assertion in the interview with Anne Compton that by sanctioning homage he is committing damage, Clarke's writing in *Canticles I* is resistant to dominant narratives, to representations of race in the African diaspora, and to literary forms – including the epic. The above excerpt demonstrates how the epic project of *Canticles I* is also an act of epic resistance. Not only is *Canticles* resistant to monolithic historical documents and literary texts, but it is also resistant to the socially constructed portrayal of the black population in Canada and the Black Atlantic. The over-arching ambition of Clarke's epic project is "to rewrite texts that have been important for folks in the African diaspora by deliberately delineating the theology of those stories," historical, literary, and biblical (qtd. in Grant 71). It is anticipated that the ongoing collection will include re-readings (and re-writings) of scriptures from an Afrocentric perspective and tracings of African-Baptist churches in Nova Scotia in the second and third installments, respectively.

This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will consider the implications for Clarke's employment of the epic mode in *Canticles I* and identify the features that classify it as such. Having been influenced by many other epic writers – he explicitly names and pays homage to Homer, Milton, Dante, Pound, and Walcott in the *Canticles I (MXVII)* poem, "Extro: Reverie & Reveille" – Clarke is indebted to the lineage of the epic. As he explains in "Toward Establishing an – or *the* – 'Archive' of African Canadian Literature, "there are always precedents, antecedents, ancestors" (Clarke 42). Yet, Clarke, like many epic poets before him, revises particular qualities of the epic mode in order to suit his African-Canadian project. A familiarization with Clarke's aesthetic and political style naturally gives way to the discussion of

Canticles I and the particular divergences from the traditional qualities in epic poetry. By highlighting Clarke's acts of revision, this chapter will yield a precise and succinct coverage of the epic as a poetic tradition by tracing evolving patterns from its classical form to its postcolonial revitalization.

The second chapter will engage in a direct treatment of voice by analyzing Clarke's methods of rhetorical configuration and subversive language in *Canticles I*. Given that he announces to the reader in the introductory sections of both volumes that *Canticles I* is lyric-structured, it will be considered why lyricism is the appropriate medium for relaying the narratives embedded in his epic. Borrowing from Edward Kamau Brathwaite's conception of a nation language in *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, this chapter also considers how Clarke attempts to configure uniquely African-Canadian language. Language is the vehicle for self-identification, Clarke says, since words are rendered useless if one "can't speak in the rhythms and nuances, use the diction and vocabulary, of the people [one] grew up with" (qtd. in Compton 161). This chapter considers how Clarke injects a distinct language in the polyvocality of *Canticles I* and many of the appropriated figures that speak within it. As an additional rhetoric of resistance – one that has been explored in his other works, particularly *Black* – Clarke employs Derek Walcott's notion of "blackening" English in order to destabilize canonical discourse. Bracketing, utilized in the title of this thesis and one of its chapters, is therefore a commentary on Clarke's mode of (re)writing; it is distinctly separate and marks its site of difference, yet is ultimately part of the coherent whole. Additionally, bracketing creates double meaning through a single word. For example, (re)presenting can, aurally, be sounded as being the initial action of representation and the presentation reformed.

The third and final chapter will inquire how *Canticles I* negotiates nationalism while situating itself within a distinctly Canadian, and broadly transnational, discourse. The national themes asserted by the earlier epics are rendered archaic in the current postcolonial moment, and as such the postcolonial poet must consider their nation through a web of interrelation and connecting routes. This is particularly evident in Clarke's epic project as his poems chronicle transatlantic movement and diasporic pathways in relation to the African-Canadian experience. In order to establish an African-Canadian vision, he says that he "can't talk about that by writing about the Caribbean or writing about Africa," but rather by forming a relationship between the Africadian and such nations through a *response* to their history, literature, and sense of place (qtd. in Compton 161). The effect of this in *Canticles I*, I argue, is that Canada's long disregarded history of slavery and injustice is brought to the forefront through the connection to other countries.

Canticles I is in many ways an extension of some of the ideas that Clarke explored in his prior works. In the introduction to *Canticles I MMXVI* and *MMXVII*, Clarke classifies his own writing as "dramatiz[ing] a partisan *History*," while repeating that the work is a "lyric-structured epic" (ix). Clarke's exploration of the epic mode is not simply consigned to that of *Canticles I*; his 1990 verse-novel, *Whylah Falls*, "contains epic machinery" and a "lyric sequence delivers the narrative" (Compton 140). In one section that prefaces the poetic content of *Whylah Falls* titled "The Death of the Epic," Clarke argues that although the "epic has perished" due to its relatively obsolete status in contemporary literature, "a memory of its grandeur and power persists in our era in the extended lyric sequence" (xvi). Not only does Clarke admit that he has a personal fascination with the epic, but he also notes that it is inherently crucial for him to adapt since the apparent "impossibility of epic in our time is akin to the impossibility of the continued

existence of Canada as a sovereign state" (xv). Why then is the epic mode one that Clarke returns to nearly twenty-five years later in *Canticles I*? Perhaps we may find the answer in Clarke's 2018 essay, "Why Not an 'African-Canadian' Epic? Lessons from Pratt and Walcott, Etc.," where Clarke critiques Canadian epic poets E.J. Pratt and Louis Dudek for presenting a Eurocentric vision of Canadian national unity – their epics on national life buckle because it is "always beset by the Other's race-based irrationality" (125). Taking a cue from Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, Clarke suggests that an African-Canadian epic is possible – and could be successful – so long as it "produces an encyclopaedic, kaleidoscopic, polyphonic poem" ("Why Not?"). Further, it must be one that "conjoins African, diasporic African, European, American, Amerindian" and, specific to Clarke's epic project, Canadian, "and even colonial and imperial histories on a basis of equality and empathy" (Clarke, "Why Not?" 132).

The appropriation of voices, and the use of polyphony, signals a complex interaction between a dominant, high literary canon and the texts forming *Canticles I*. Throughout his career, Clarke has been actively engaging his creative projects with such a canon. He holds "dialogical relationships with the canon," particularly since Black Nova Scotians are "very much still outside the canon" (qtd. in Compton 162, 141). As a recognized poetic model existing within the confines of the canon, the epic mode is a form that has been actively engaged with by Clarke in his past creative works, such as in *Whylah Falls* and *Beatrice Chancy*. In relation to Dante's *Inferno*, Clarke self-identifies "*Whylah Falls* as the 'Paradiso' and *Beatrice Chancy* as the 'Inferno'" (qtd. in Compton 151). Both *Whylah Falls* and *Beatrice Chancy* are comprehensive in their use of canonical forms: *Whylah Falls* contains, as previously mentioned, epic machinery, lyricism, and pastoral elements; *Beatrice Chancy* amalgamates Percy Shelley's 1819 drama *The Cenci*, Shakespeare's romantic rhetorical wit, and Dante Rossetti's concept of the divine saint.

These are select examples that demonstrate Clarke's continuous adaptations of established canonical forms. Clarke's canonical callings, from Ovid to Baraka, in his 2006 suite of poems, *Blue*, is successful as it "perform[s] poetic difference (ie., the ability to perform the difference between the self and other, the subject and object)" (Pivato xiv). Similarly, in *Canticles I*, Clarke's work pulls from a multitude of canonical influences – including Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, and Paul Laurence Dunbar – in the *MMXVII* volume, to create dissonance between master and minority narratives. Mirrored between the introductory sections of both volumes – near identical phrasing is employed – is Clarke's declaration of his own method of evoking the canon in writing, which he describes as being "Oulipo, elliptical and serendipitous" (*Canticles I* ix). The voices of the poems, he explains, arrive through spontaneity:

> Upon meditating on a collection of words, phrases, images, and/or lines, a "voice" would begin to order the disparate materials into a "confessional" narrative. Usually, I did not know beforehand the identity of the subject. […] Once the new piece was scribed, I'd find a space for it – chronologically – in the developing whole. (Clarke, *Canticles I* ix).

This not only illuminates why Clarke feels the need to engage with the canon and throughout *Canticles I*, but more explicitly comments upon Clarke's task of canon reformation as a response to its problematic functions. The voice he assigns to the content of any particular poem in the collection, which is usually a *mélange* of historical and literary sources, works to usurp a dominant narrative and diversify the canon. Even the arrangement of both volumes of *Canticles I* destabilizes the structural components of canonical texts, as his poems are listed at the back of the volume in a "Table of Verses" in order of appearance without page numbers, rather than at the forefront in a neatly organized index. In an act of canon reformation, Clarke thus forces his readers in *Canticles I* to flip through the text mechanically without being guided by a dominant

structure – there is no guiding principle of organization, as the index contains no page numbers to mark where they lie in the complete text.

In addition to critiquing the canon in his creative and critical works, Clarke further endeavours to understand the relationship between history and postcolonial, diasporic consciousness. Diasporic consciousness investigates the complex dynamics of multiple socio-cultural conditions, both in the nation state and in the person's status in exile. Throughout the two volumes of *Canticles I*, Clarke maintains an engaged dialogue with the living and the dead to explore textual roots – and routes – and intertextual relations. As Winfried Siemerling explains, contemporary black Canadian writing is "routed through new time-spaces that disturb the geographies and temporalities, the borders and sedimented histories, left behind by the hemispheric expansion of the empires" of the Western world (28). *Canticles I*, now the newest segment in Clarke's portfolio of black Canadian writing, fashions a disaporic map of historical and literary relations to (re)contextualize African-Canadians within a larger body of historiography. These canticles – or hymns – are punctuated with polyphony, songs and sonnets, histories and homilies, to – as Clarke poignantly puts it in the foreword – fashion "palimpsest and mirrors – to present *History* as an echo chamber" (x). It is the onus of the contemporary, and now arguably the postcolonial, poet to disrupt the strict teleology of past accounts:

> … the older poet wrote out of a belief in the truthfulness of history, while the poet of today sets out to unwrite or rewrite history by deliberately suspending its purported objectivity and inclusiveness; place, the locus of equally strong anxiety and astonishment in the previous century, is rendered now as a *palimpsest* of geographical and textual layers that the poet has to sift through. (my emphasis, Kamboureli 3)

History is rendered a palimpsest as it is retained, yet effaced to leave room for revision by way of the postcolonial consciousness of the author – voice and place are inherently destabilized. Even Clarke's methodological "constraints" of writing *Canticles I* fashions a diasporic map through physical place: he vowed to "draft no piece in Toronto, Ontario" (his place of residence), so that the collection would become a "species of travel writing" that is demonstrative of transatlantic movement (ix). This is apparent as the reader enters into the poems of each volume: the concluding page of each poem contains a bolded footnote, which lists the place and date of composition. Another dimension to Clarke's emphasis on diapsoric consciousness is that each date/timestamp is written in English, French, and Latin numerals, sequentially. Therefore, Clarke physically and literarily constructs and travels old routes through new time-spaces.

In line with Clarke's emphasis on postcolonial consciousness, one can trace his celebration of Canada through transnational interactions in his creative works. As Clarek explains in the preface to *Odysseys Home,* African-Canadian literature is distinct since it "encompasses the new and old, the come-from-away and the down-home, the urban and the rural, the pull of the regional and the equally irresistible seductions of African-American and Afro-Caribbean culture" (11). In this regard, Clarke's creative works, and by force *Canticles I*, situates the African-Canadian experience through a web of interrelation to the greater African diaspora. In the context of African-Canadian literature, the genre will often "utilize African-American texts and historical culture icons to define African-Canadian experience" (Clarke, *Odysseys* 72). Clarke rather evokes African-American referents in order to situate the African-Canadian experience. This is evident in the preface to *Whylah Falls*, where Clarke considers how the slave passage to the North, or Canada – and more specifically Acadia – must necessarily be considered in tandem with its sister country, the United States:

> Founded in 1783 by African-American Loyalists seeking Liberty, Justice, and Beauty, Whylah Falls is a village in Jarvis Country, Nova Scotia. Wrecked by country blues and warped by constant tears, it is a snowy, northern Mississippi, with blood spattered, not on magnolias, but on pines, lilacs, and wild roses. (7)

In *Odysseys Home* – an epic title of sorts in itself – Clarke reiterates the need to retain a fluid geographical border between the United States and Canada and the historical connotations it carries. In this regard, Clarke says it is "impossible to conceive of Black Canada without the sobering boundary that the United States implies" (28). Clarke's emphasis on establishing Canada through its transnational interrelations is a primary theme in *Canticles I*. In the *MMXVII* volume poem, "Letter from Rev. King," Clarke represents the transatlantic movement through dialect and place:

> Indeed, the penniless, lash-bent Africans
> comin to Queen's Bush
> after journeys as fearsome as *The Odyssey*
> seek *Charity*
> to stay the Poor House
> and say out the Penitentiary, eh? (115)

The multiple registers of dialect – negro "comin," literary referents to the classical epic, *The Odyssey*, and 'Canuck' colloquial speech, "eh" – are linked to specific locales. These specifications of place include references to African origins, Queen's Bush as the vast unsettled area between Waterloo Country and Lake Huron, and Poor House, which was a government workhouse in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Combined, dialect and place situate certain Canadian national themes within a broader transnational web.

There are certain limitations to this study. As mentioned previously, there are two volumes to *Canticles I,* each of which spans approximately 450 pages. Due to the overwhelming size of the volumes combined, I will be drawing primarily from the *MMXVII* volume, and will hereafter be citing it simply as *Canticles I*. When I do extract from the *MMXVI* volume, I will retain the roman numerals of the title in order to indicate it as such. A significant caveat to this study is, given the relatively recent publication(s) of *Canticles I*, and the fact that the multi-volume work is still underway, there is scant commentary on this particular piece. Therefore, in an effort to contextualize *Canticles I* within a larger body of scholarly discourse, this thesis will intersect with scholarship on Clarke's particular aesthetics in his larger oeuvre.

Chapter 1: Tracing and Transforming the Epic Mode

Many of George Elliott Clarke's creative processes have been deliberate and suit his newest endeavour, *Canticles I*. For example, *Whylah Falls*, an epic of sorts, weds the canon and personal experience through authorial craftsmanship: Clarke appropriates certain forms, such as by taking the "great Miltonic instrument" – blank verse – and writing poems out of his own experiences or those of the Nova Scotian community (qtd. in Grant 140). *Canticles I* is no exception to this claim. Clarke informs his readers in the introductory section about the nature of the collection. It is an epic that "dramatizes a partisan *History*" so that it becomes a showcase of "genocidal *Imperialism* and criminal *Slavery and Justice*-seeking rebels" – and to show how it came into fruition as "a collage of accident inspirations" (ix). The volume thereby elucidates Clarke's investment in postcolonialism and the methodical crossover between his creative works and critical works: *Canticles I* attempts to "rescue or assert certain aesthetical/political viewpoints [by] combatting the hegemony of the standard aesthetic/po-litical viewpoints" (qtd. in Grant 159). Clarke therefore returns to the epic mode – one that has been parsed in some of his other works – in *Canticles I* by rejecting the hegemonic "epic" landmarks in history. Clarke escapes the trappings of a master discourse to configure a uniquely polyphonic African-Canadian epic that is composed of narrative wisps – racial minority narratives that are frequently expunged by metanarratives.

The perspicuous employment of the epic mode in Clarke's *Canticles I* is particularly intriguing given that the genre has slowly been consigned to the past in literary criticism and is manifestly attenuated in most of the twentieth century. M.M. Bakhtin's issue with the epic,

expressed in his 1941 essay "Epic and Novel," is that it is a closed genre.[1] Despite the labour of revision, the epic, by the time it approaches modernism, is characterized as "a hardened and no longer flexible skeleton" (Bakhtin qtd. in Runchman 521). John P. McWilliams similarly banishes the epic to the past; contemporary attempts at a poetic epic, such as Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," no longer hold in regard the established tropes of the epic tradition as it "rejects narrative progression, undermines the traditional idea of an epic hero, and is in cadenced free verse rather than the conventional blank verse" (Runchman 522). One can hear the resonances of Bakhtin's stance on the antiquated genre of the epic when McWilliams asserts that poetry is no longer the most appropriate medium for relaying a heroic narrative. Pound would likewise assert in the *Paris Review Interviews* (1962) that the archaic *epos* of unity is unsuitable in the industrial age of the twentieth-century since "'the modern mind contains heteroclite elements'" (qtd. in Runchman 523). Derek Walcott, author of the postcolonial epic, *Omeros* (1990), similarly engages in a literary disavowal of his own text to underscore the theoretical concerns that surround the genre: "'I do not think of it as an epic … Certainly not in the sense of epic design'" (qtd. in Van Sickle 14). George Elliott Clarke also joins in on this academic discussion of the epic genre: the early twentieth-century saw the turn to short poems as modernist poets believed that "no one should be writing epics anymore because [the poetical tradition] moved into the industrial age where everything happens in minutes" (qtd. in Grant 69). Beyond a tradition of the epic mode in creative works, these commentaries highlight a varied and capricious use of the epic in literary discourse. However, Clarke's twenty-first century epic, which exists in a period that is arguably more harried than that of the twentieth-century, succeeds

[1] Bakhtin employs the term "closed" to connote a genre that is completed. On can hear resonances of his discussion on the "closed" nature of the epic when he says: "We encounter the epic as a genre that has not only long since completed its development, but one that is already antiquated" (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* 321).

because it dips into past historical accounts and voices to incite change and create a panoptic catalogue of the diasporic community of Africadians. *Canticles I* is arranged as an epic since it allows Clarke to "digest a lot of history" and share it in an insightful, and often provocative, way (qtd. in Grant 69).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the genre of the epic in postcolonial theory has received scant favourable attention. In the introduction to *The Postcolonial Epic: From Melville to Walcott and Ghosh*, Sneharika Roy explains that the genre's intrinsic undertones of "imperial authority *par excellence*" causes the epic to be "*inherently incompatible* with the postcolonial agenda of reappraising colonialism and its aftermath" (1). However, Clarke chooses the epic mode implicitly in *Whylah Falls*, and now explicitly in *Canticles I*, to highlight prevelant acts of colonial violence and illuminate an African-Canadian racial consciousness in past historical accounts through acts of revision. In *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered*, Winfried Siemerling explains that the backwards-glance of the epic mode is not necessarily nostalgic for the past, but is rather an excavation of history: "historical haunting creates ghosts that speak more directly, inviting and provoking communication" (19). Clarke thus chooses the epic mode as the foundation for *Canticles I* so that he can remain immediately engaged in a subversive dialogue with the past and fashion a diasporic map of minority narratives not previously inscribed into monolithic accounts.

Structurally, *Canticles I* concedes to many of the identifying features of the traditional epic mode, particularly its length and structural division. On the nature of length, Clarke divides his epic project into three parts, with the first part sectioned into two volumes, each of which comprising over 400 pages. Referencing Ezra Pound's *Cantos* as a framework for length, Clarke states that he "followed Pound in that some of the poems are 8, 10, or 15, pages long," with the

caveat that some of them are a few pages or a single page in length (qtd. in Grant 71). Although Clarke does not explicitly state this in his Grant interview, it is also implied that the division of *Canticles* into volumes and parts is evocative of Pound's division in *Cantos*. The *Cantos* is comprised of ten official books, spanning the years 1924-1959, and individually grouped within those dates. As stated in the introductory segment to both volumes of *Canticles I MMXVI* and *MMXVII,* each part is projected to cover varying moments in relevant history, scriptures and narratives of creation from an Afrocentric and Africadian perspective. This division accounts for the respective themes of each volume to be grouped together by the year of arrangement. For example, Pound's *Pisan Cantos (LXXIV-LXXXIV)*, written in 1945 during his period of military detainment near Pisa, Italy, delivers a fugue that interweaves his prominent political, economic, and anti-Semitic views with the elegiac moments of his nervous collapse.

This connection between Pound and Clarke is loose and is merely emblematic of the way in which Clarke partly adapts the common convention of significant length that is identified with the epic mode. Another structural connection that Clarke upholds is the further division of each volume into "books," with the poems falling within them. The introductory statement of *Canticles I (MMXVI)* is followed by a dividing page that reads:

The Book of Initiation

~

Apologia / Gloss / Odes

This formatting returns a short twenty-four pages later to announce the second, and final book that is then carried over into *Canticles I (MMXVII)*:

The Book of Origins

~

I maintain Clarke's formatting for the sake of drawing a relevant comparison between the structural arrangement of Clarke's *Canticles I* and Derek Walcott's postcolonial epic, *Omeros*. As evident in the titles of Clarke's "books," these subdivisions are meant to establish a teleological account of history and also signal the hero's initial descent in the epic tradition. While Clarke subdivides his volumes into two "books" (thus far), Walcott's work is divided into seven. The sixty-four chapters of Walcott's epic are arranged within each book without clear consistency of spacing. Walcott's "books" are simply numbered, and though they are not teleological in narrative telling, they track the Omeros' journey, from St. Lucia in Books One and Two, the Middle Passage in Book Three, North America in Book Four, Europe in Book Five, and the return to St. Lucia in Books Six and Seven. The Homeric epic, *Odyssey*, is subdivided into twenty-four books to aid the narrative, which mainly focuses on the hero, Odysseus, and his ten-year journey home after the fall of Troy, as the books encapsulate major themes and time-events. Tracing this method of book subdivision in *Canticles I* reveals Clarke's longer extension of this tradition and fulfills Henriksen Frygian's maxim that "[l]iterature is allusion; genre is lineage" (qtd. in Clarke, "Why Not?" 134).

Other stylistic qualities of *Canticles I*, such as the use of rhyme and verse, are more heavily adapted, but highlight the continued acts of revision that underscore the epic mode as a lineage, particularly its formulaic arrangement. *Canticles I* is primarily composed in free verse and is at times sprinkled with couplets or quatrains in successive rhyme. This is a large divergence from the "prototypical exponent of epic as genre" – Homer's epic works *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Nagy 21). These Homeric epics are often considered to be the locus for epic theory; they establish the convention of "heroic hexameter," or dactylic hexameter, and epitomise what

Eric Havelock calls "the Homeric encyclopaedia" (qtd. in Johns-Putra). Although the "Homeric blood-lines become literary lineage" in regard to literary criticism, many epic poets take up the epic tradition with revision in mind, such as John Milton's employment of blank verse in his epic, *Paradise Lost* and Walcott's use of *terza rima* verse in *Omeros*. But, within the metrical verse of the Homeric epics, "lists, catalogues and parataxis are elements of [the] poetic structure" (Henriksen 27). This is a feature that Clarke partly retains in *Canticles I*, most evidently displayed in poems like "Post-Bellum Negro Inventory":

> the two-faced, dual-citizen, double-talkin Negro;
>
> the cotton-pickin, banjo-pickin, nose-pickin Negro;
>
> the recidivist, throat-cuttin, Republican-Party Negro;
>
> the lavender-gum, ivory-tooth, indigo-sable Negro; (220)

This is a short excerpt from this poem, which hyphenates, enjambs, and juxtaposes the many identities that the Negro holds after the antebellum period. While clearly Clarke is not adhering to dactylic hexameter, the cataloguing function of the Homeric poetic structure is preserved and creates a unique interplay between the metrical ictus and the natural accent of spoken words that accentuates the African-Canadian project of *Canticles I*. This is akin to Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, which inscribes and orders names into a catalogue to subvert the "universalizing or totalizing aim" of the literary list and epic catalogue. If *Zong!* aims to represent that the massacre "inhabit[s] *every* space" through "multiple word possibilities," then Clarke similarly achieves the same effect through hyphenation in regard to the post-antebellum African-American in "Post-Bellum Negro Inventory" (Fehskens 410). No longer is the African-American a static single descriptor, as evident when contrasted to the prior poem, "Negro Inventory," wherein such

individuals are "canine" or "naturally chocolate," but rather a multitude of epithets (Clarke, *Canticles I* 148).

What these structural acts of revision reveal throughout *Canticles I*, and the lineage of epics pre-dating it, is that the genre of the epic, the *epos*, is continually in flux. For example, at the centre of the contemporary long poem in Canada, Kamboureli argues, is a discrepancy between the colonial conventions and postcolonial deconstructive tendencies, thereby resulting the genre to become an "archaeological field, a scattering of formal and thematic origins" (45). Similarly, Beissinger, Tylus, and Wofford stress that "the thematic kernel" of the epic is that the genre is "created and sustained through the challenging of boundaries" (11-12). Rewriting narratives of the past is no futile task; rather, it requires a poet indebted to the whole tradition – one with a learned "historical sense," which T.S. Eliot says in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "involves a perception, not only of the past, but of its presence" (37). Clarke reiterates this in the penultimate and ultimate poems of *Canticles I (MXVII)*: "Epic poets are mirror martyrs"; "What is now, was *then* – once" (435; 439).

As Katharine Burkitt explains, postcolonial epic texts are self-reflexive and "self-conscious of their generic ambiguousness and their uneasy relation to their epic forerunners" (2). Therefore, the act of revising the antecedent text gives rise to a dynamic, discursive relationship between the precursor and belated poet. *Canticles I* participates in the tradition of the epic through Clarke's web of relationality to past epic poets such as Homer, Milton, Dante, Pound, and Walcott. The formal markers of the epic mode that are inaugurated by the ancient Greek tradition – the hero's descent, beginning *in media res*, the central evocation of history, the coverage of national ideology, the theme of *nostos* (homecoming), the *aiodos* (singer), the speaker's address, and the use of various languages – are thus adapted in order to write an epic

within a particular framework which, for Clarke, is emphatically postcolonial and unequivocally African-Canadian.

As a prototypical element of the traditional epic, *Canticles I (MMXVI)* begins with the hero's descent into the underworld; however, for Clarke, it is an underworld that exists on the earthly plane of being: history. As Roy Kiyooka points out, "the slowly turning propeller of our adamant History proposes that the yet-to-be-written Canadian Epic will be a wind-borne series of discreet images, 4000 lines long, with an *ocean* at either end for ballast" (my emphasis, 332). The opening poem of *Canticles I (MMXVI)*, "Apologia," launches into the unidentified hero's descent into this version type of underworld:

> There is no choice
> but to go down
> into the Hell
> of *History*
> go down
> to the sea
> where you see
> slavers floating in new language. (Clarke 3)

This initial stanza signals to the reader that the underworld is not necessarily a "Hell" with the same panache of Dante's opening *cantiche* of *Divide Comedy, Inferno*, but rather a real time-event in history. The primary imagery of sea-as-Hell reminds the reader that the topic at hand is concerned with transatlantic movement and the Middle Passage. The latter half of "Apologia" further conjoins this oceanic journey to *History* and colonization in the broad sense:

> But *History* –

a demonic Bible –

echoes

voyages from Africa

through Hell

to “New World” Africa

reflecting

both Hell

and a new Bible … (Clarke, *Canticles I [MMXVI]* 4)

The descent into the sea therefore elicits not only the distant past, but also the immediate present; they are reflections of each other, and inform the corpus of narratives – historical and biblical. Clarke’s application of sea imagery in regard to the epic trope of the hero’s descent is reminiscent of Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s application in her considerably epic poem, *Zong!*, although she punctuates it with different force. In the first section, “Os,” the poem “Zong! #3” configures the forgotten African slaves left derelict by the slave-ship of the same name in 1781:

the some of negroes

over

board

the rest in lives

drowned

exist did not

in themselves

preservation

obliged… (Philip, *Zong!* 6)

Like Clarke's evocation of *History* as the primary locale for the hero's descent, Philip works with the archives of legal documents and account ledgers that have significant gaps for the hero to plunge into and disrupt. Clarke's "new language" is echoed here in Philip's work; the legal narrative of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* (1783) court case is the place of the hero's descent, since the heroes of Philip's narrative – the drowned slaves – already exist there. The *Gregson v. Gilbert* case found that the deliberate killing of slaves was, in certain circumstances, legal and that the insurers could be required to pay for the deaths. Using the only extant public document, Philip excavates the legal text through the (re)arrangement of its original language. As Erin M. Fehskens explains, the chronotope of "a haunted Atlantic" provides both the basis for the "untelling" in Philip's postcolonial epic, and, in regard to *Canticles I*, apprehends the "Atlantic slave trade as an historical condition whose logics still inform our world" (409). Clarke further evokes Philip's imagery of the ocean floor as a burial site in the poem, "Reparations Ode":

> The Atlantic is seldom velvet *Luxury*.
> More regularly, it's a damp dump,
> a cemetery parading as a waterfall,
> where African skeletons
> and other delicate wreckage …
> tumble into *Erasure* … (*Canticles I [MMXVI]* 10)

Thus, the hero plummets into the netherworld of the oceanic floor to recover not only the language washed over by history, but also the bodies evacuated by it. Whereas Philip's waves of floating phrases disrupt the jargon of the historical telling of *Zong!*, Clarke creates dissonance between the ocean as an often-regarded place of Paradise and one of a turbulent Hell. The sea-faring voyage is a juxtaposition of colonial wealth – of *Luxury* – and of destruction and death.

Similarly, *Omeros* uses the Caribbean Sea as the site for the hero's descent into the journey through colonial history in Book One, Chapter VIII:

> The shreds of the ocean's floor passed him from corpses
> that had perished in the crossing, their hair like weeds,
> their bones were long coral fingers, bubbles of eyes
> watched him, a brain-coral gurgled their words
> and every bubble englobed a biography … (Walcott 45-46)

From time passed, the bodies evacuated into the sea via acts of colonialism and passages over the Atlantic become encoded as part of the oceanic architecture; as the bodies of their subject often reside there, the sea is a site for the hero's descent in postcolonial epics. As Adeline Johns-Putra explains, the postcolonial heroic quest embarked upon through such a descent is "a heroic reclamation of the past in order to achieve victory in the present" (182). *Canticles I* thus engages in the epic convention of the descent with a revision that pays homage to other postcolonial epic writers such as Philip and Walcott.

In line with the epic convention of the hero's descent, Clarke enters the narrative *in media res*. This is established not only in "Apologia" and the other opening poems of the "Book of Initiation" in *Canticles I (MMXVI)*, but in every subsequent poem of the "Book of Origins" in both volumes. Narrative exposition is bypassed and filled in gradually through the description of past events as *Canticles I* builds a repertoire resistant to the unilateral – or teleological – narrative of "*History*," as frequently italicized and capitalized by Clarke. Beginning *in media res* is a device that can be first observed in the early Homeric epic of *Odyssey*, which begins with the fall of Troy and covers the narrative of Odysseus over forty years. Walcott remains faithful to Homer in this way; however, Odysseus as a dominant narrator is "replaced by an Odysseus who

performs these actions as an active participant" (Tynan 148). Clarke adapts both Homer and Walcott by way of the narrative and action of Odysseus in the poem, "The Odyssey of Ulysses X*[2]," which arrives forty-three pages into the *MMXVI* volume of *Canticles I*. The poem begins *in media res* with an admixture of both the present actions and past efforts of the speaker's part in the battle of Troy:

> Spurring on my army of pikes, scythes,
>
> saws, axes, pliers, hammers,
>
> I remodelled Troy as a slave homeland
>
> of overturned chairs – …
>
> wet, lime-scent whitewash; (Clarke, *Canticles I [MMXVI]* 43)

In Clarke's poem, Malcolm X-as-Odysseus is both narrator and performer; he is transplanted *in media res* during a time period to which he does not belong. The slaughter of the Trojans during the war is, in this instance, mirrored with the struggles of the civil rights movement, particularly in the comment on racial integration and assimilation. As the poem progresses, Malcolm X speaks as Odysseus; he moves from a war-torn land, through "white-whipped, sapphire waves," to, "finally cometh / *Home*, as Homer" (Clarke, *Canticles I [MMXVI]* 43, 49). The intersection between beginning *in media res* and the poetic subject creates tension between that which is historically known, and that which is imaginatively configured.

Given that history is the essential subject frequently engages with by the epic mode, and the identified topic pertaining to the whole of *Canticles I*, Clarke's uptake is perhaps not so much

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[2] Clarke provides a footnote at the bottom of this poem that reads: * Cf. *Autobiography of Malcolm X.* Cf. is an abbreviation for the Latin word *conferatur*, which means to compare. In this instance, Clarke is referring the reader to three primary points of comparison and context for the poem: the mythological account of the Trojan War, Odysseus' pseudonym of Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey*, and Malcolm X's philosophy of black pride, black nationalism, and pan-Africanism.

of a revision, but a tailored use. In one sense of the epic, the genre is acutely historical. Pound himself comes to define the epic as "a poem containing history," and Torquato Tasso, an epic poet who closely follows Dante, also remarks that "the argument of the best epic should be based on history" (qtd. in Runchman 523; qtd. in Johns-Putra 62). Even the fundamental methodology of *Canticles I*, Clarke states in one interview, is to evoke "the Poundian 'luminous details'" in order to make the diminished history of minority narratives come to life (qtd. in Grant). In "Gloss," Clarke outlines how the dominant narratives of history are contrapuntally inscribed by erasing racial minorities:

> Beyond the deathless names whose examples
> nullify an epic their examples nurse,
>
> each story
> is arbitrary
> tributary
> to every other story.*[3] (*Canticles I [MMXVI]* 5)

Underscoring the epic mode is a profound fascination with the past, which, evident in the above strophe, is problematic for the postcolonial and postmodern period given that their histories are recycled for imperial leverage. In the above extract, Clarke demonstrates how the epic, to counter Walcott's assertion, is not necessarily "*intrinsically* epic – ie., an encyclopaedic history," but rather a cycle of disavowal of certain stories and narratives ("Why Not?" 134). Sneharika

[3] This *conferatur* is to "Graves," which, implied by Clarke, could refer to Robert Graves, who was a British critic, classicist, and historical novelist. He worked with many translations of classical Latin and Ancient Greek texts, and his 1955 novel, *The Greek Myths*, was well respected for its retellings but dismissed for its unconventional etymologies. Graves could also refer to the literal "graves" dug for those stories that have been disregarded by the dominant narratives of the "deathless names" – the primary contributors of history.

Roy questions how, if the traditional "epic celebrates the *presence* of territory, ancestral history and a collectively shaped culture," it can possibly be a relevant form for those civilizations "shaped by the violent *loss* of territory, history and culture?" (2). Evidently, Frantz Fanon, in his essay "On Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, similarly casts the epic mode into a monological, and reflexively colonial, discourse:

> The colonist makes history. His life is an epic, an odyssey. He is invested with the very beginning: "We made this land." He is the guarantor for its existence: "If we leave all will be lost, and this land will return to the Dark Ages." (14-15)

Despite the cautionary claims by critics considering the imperial historical feature of the epic mode, postcolonial poets such as Clarke navigate history as a subject *vis-à-vis* resistant nostalgia and subversive retellings – they reconfigure the postcolonial subject as the one who makes history. In *Odysseys Home*, Clarke explains that what "students of African-Canadian literature must do is counter amnesia, for those who do not research history are condemned to falsify it" (7). This is reiterated in the "Polemical 'Conclusion'" of *Canticles I (MMXVII)*, as Clarke announces that while he is "neither old-fashioned nor sorry," he "will not edit *Truth*" (439). Truth, italicized, exemplifies the denouncement of history as veridical, and also sounds editing as a process of reconfiguration. Clarke thus counters imperial history – namely acts of colonization or oppression administered by nations – through what Roy explains is the intention of postcolonial epics to create a "cathartic conjunction between a fissured self and a fragmented past" (184). Clarke's notion aligns with Pound's, for whom history is linked to "the break between past and present: fullness and emptiness, wholeness and partiality" (North 153). In response to Fanon, Clarke argues against "complete" imperialist claims to history by critiquing the catalogue internally in the closing section of the poem, "A Tempio Malatestiano (Rimini)":

the prevailing momentum of Europe's *History* –

from peasants vs. popes

to clerics vs. kings –

is,

to cannibalize every culture

that got no cannon – (*Canticles I* 376)

In the above passage, Clarke rhetorically plays upon the military cannon by invoking the larger canon, both literary and historical. In order to overcome the obstacle of dominant narratives, Siemerling suggests that black Canadian writers fashion imaginative discourses and possible futures to engage with a colonial past as they "exert cultural agency in their reading and 'consumption' of historical texts and contexts that have been mostly mediated by hegemonic historiography" (27). Postcolonial poets such as Clarke must, in order assert their individualism, "appropriate" traditions of the epic genre and evoke them "in order to violate them, to mock them" (Fuchs 30). This is apparent throughout both volumes of *Canticles I*, as Clarke actively re-reads and re-writes narratives that have been crucial in imperial history, through imperial figures such as Columbus, Pushkin, and Mao. The deliberate spacing between "is" and the enjambed lines of Western history and minority cultures in "A Tempio Malatestiano (Rimini)" demonstrates an intentional fragmentation that comments upon colonial history and postcolonial reality: the momentum of the four foremost lines quite literally "cannibalizes" the postcolonial discourse of the minority culture in the latter two lines.

The evocation of history, and the backwards glance into the past, conjures up the Grecian inaugural theme of the epic: *nostos*. The yearning for *nostos*, derived from the thematic

tendencies in ancient Greek literature, employs "the archetypal seafarer" whose "navigation of new routes" is pitted against his eventual homecoming (Tynan xvi, 147). Clarke employs the Odyssean theme of *nostos* in the poem of the MMXVII volume, "Transit to Spring," which imagines one's exodus out of slavery to a place of "*Freedom*" and warmth in manner of the Odyssean tradition:

> the sun, exploding, cheering,
>
> welcoming
>
> our belated homecoming,
>
> icy shackles, melting… (*Canticles* 65)

These final four lines of the poem envision the concept of *nostos* – homecoming – and float off the page through the ellipses like the sun literally melting off the confines of slavery and the harsh elements of winter. Upon turning the page over, however, the reader encounters the same poem translated – as identified in the annotation – in Hindi. The script, evidently thicker, abandons the use of punctuation, such as the dashes and ellipses, likely suggesting that this warmer destination has been found by way of the transatlantic slave trade, but it is not necessarily "*Freedom*." Clarke follows Walcott as he evokes the trope of *nostos* in *Omeros* to deliberate on the implications of cultural insularism, diaspora, and exile. The thematic alienation of one's homeland renders the Odyssean leitmotif poignant in colonial contexts, but in *Omeros*, the colonial quest is overturned as the postcolonial poet ventures to those Western places at the crux of colonial power; therefore, the "poet's journey is circular" and announces an integration of disparate worlds "rather than by simply polarising them" (Johns-Putra 180). In Book Four, Walcott demonstrates this incessant need to concede to the colonial past:

> But before you return, you must enter cities

that open like *The World's Classics*, in which I dreamt

I saw my shadow on their flagstones, histories

that carried me over the bridge of self-contempt … (*Omeros* 187)

Place, in Walcott's epic and successive postcolonial epics, is a locus for the tangible understanding and reconstruction of history. The very foundations of such historical sites, once neatly paved-over by colonial narratives, become riddled with cracks and are emblematic of the fractured identities of postcolonial subjects. Like Walcott, Clarke equates the journeys of these displaced peoples to be as "epic" as those emblematized in the works of Homer, and yet, both authors suggest that this journey does not necessarily lead to a homecoming, but to another exile. In the various forms of the odyssey, Claudio Guillen explains that the literatures of counter-exile often "incorporate[s] the separation from place, class, language, or native community, insofar as they triumph over the separation and thus can offer wide dimensions of meaning that transcend the earlier attachment to place or native origin" (272). Both poets suspend the time of arrival – for Clarke it is "belated," while for Walcott it demands an initial "entrance" – into Western culture to imagine a counter-exile.

In the introduction to *Canticles I (MMXVII)*, Clarke classifies his own writing as "dramatiz[ing] a partisan *History*" while repeating that the work is a "lyric-structured epic" (ix). From the onset, the reader is given the sense that the work is a highly performative iteration of a classical form. The classical epics, aligned with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, are the touchstones upon which the epic tradition is built and they work in tandem to establish the conventions of the epic mode. Emerging out of a larger corpus of Greek heroic poetry, the Homeric epics were composed in a pre-literate age and relied upon their oral recitations. As Adeline Johns-Putra notes, such epics were considered "songs" and were "recited by an *aiodos*, a singer" (19). The

poet, or, in the case of the Greek epics, the *aiodos,* is a conduit for knowledge. Ultimately, "the poet is not a creator of art, but a conveyor of history" (Johns-Putra 22). The classical *aiodos* invokes the cosmological deities or the muse for divine knowledge, and it is through the poet's "privileged access to the muses" that the audience comes into this knowledge (Johns-Putra 21). *Canticles I* abandons the epic tradition of the muse albeit retains the fundamentals of the *aiodos*. The destabilization of an authoritative voice is achieved through Clarke's self-described "[o]ulipo, elliptical, and serendipitous" literary craftsmanship and his meditations on producing a "'confessional narrative'" (ix). As the *aiodos* for African-Canadian and Africadian experiences, Clarke relays the voices, narratives, and mythologies of those who have been displaced or suppressed. The *aiodos* plays a significant role in this context. As Clarke states in his anthology, *Fire on the Water*, "Africadian literature commenced with song, story, and sermon" (11). Orality and performance, through the *aiodos* of postcolonial epics like *Canticles I*, transmits cultural history and relays the narrative of a community. In an act of authorial self-reflection, Clarke ponders in the "Polemical 'Conclusion'" of *Canticles I (MMXVII)*, "What's the value of my first-person address, / i.e., 'I'?" (438). The value, one could argue, comes in his excavation of narratives of the African diaspora. Therefore, he is not the forbearer of truths, nor the essential subject behind the lyrical "I," but rather, in an adaptation of the Greek tradition, the *aiodos* – the singer for those songs unsung.

Clarke's adaptation of the role of the *aiodos* in his epic narrative, *Canticles I*, evacuates the underlying national themes that the epic mode has traditionally advocated for. Despite Clarke's bountiful canonical influences, his objection to critical receptions of the traditional epic mode is the emphasis placed upon national paradigms found in epics of the past. This can be observed in the likes of Homer, Virgil, and Spenser, all of whom bestow an epic coverage of

national history and ideology in their epic poetry. For Pound, the *epos* of the past, particularly the national myth of unity propounded in the classics, could not suit a Western society of increased skepticism; however, the *Cantos* still offer a syncretic alchemy of American history. As Pound declares, "the epic in the real sense is the speech of a nation thru one man" (qtd. in Moody 122). In a contemporary context, Clarke asserts, "both Pound and Frye read the possibility for twentieth-century epic through an ethnocentric and nationalist lens that advances the epic poet as the vatic articulator of the dominant – or administrating – ethnicity of a nation or imperial homeland" ("Why Not" 119-20). Even Clarke's anthology, *Odysseys Home*, was critiqued by one reviewer as exhibiting deeply nationalist themes: "the very term 'odyssey' … it is, he feels, a conservative one. It suggests that classical mythology provides a frame for understanding the world" (Goldie 483). This is a significant obstacle that the postcolonial epic poet is burdened with, and one that Clarke successfully traverses in *Canticles I*.

In response, Clarke negotiates notions of authority in the genre of the epic throughout *Canticles I* by viewing Canada *vis-à-vis* its transnational interactions. This method of interrelation evidently became apparent to Clarke once he moved south to teach at Duke University; he explains in the preface to *Odysseys Home* that he "felt compelled to extend [his] compass nationally (and internationally), to begin to ponder the contours and continuities of an *African-Canadian* literature" (4). In *Literary Form as Postcolonial Critique: Epic Proportions*, Katharine Burkitt reiterates the need for this transnational methodology in our current postcolonial moment: the "epic becomes revitalized as a mode of articulating the increasingly global world in which national identities can only be conceived of in relation to each other" (3). The editors of *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* – Beissinger, Tylus, and Wofford – stress this in the introduction by positioning the epic as an interlocutor for cultures and eras: the

epic is meant to be a "poetic narrative of length and complexity that centers around deeds of significance to the *community*" (my emphasis, 2). Community, in relation to *Canticles I*, is thus a connection to the African diaspora and its various routes/roots. By deliberately creating narrative gaps, or liminal spaces for multiple voices, Clarke applies Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone" of transatlantic tension and "imperial encounters" (8). Rather than appropriating African-American historical and cultural referents to expound the African-Canadian experience, in *Canticles I,* Clarke evokes these icons in order to situate it: his "poetics negotiate cultural space through adherence to and revision of tradition" (Fiorentino xi). For example, in the *Canticles I (MMXVII)* poem, "To Critique Edward Mitchell Bannister," Clarke points to the pragmatism in Bannister's – a nineteenth-century African-Canadian artist – adoption of the American hyphenation, rather than identifying to his African-Canadian birthright:

> You remember the red-crushed rock beach;
> sketch this *Truth*;
> although schoolbooks' wrinklings of ink
> omit your Atlantic waves. (104)

While the poem clearly critiques Bannister for taking up residence in America and an inauthentic cultural identity, the speaker of the poem exhibits a certain level of sympathy in the above lines. Bannister's paintings "hang in the shadows of museums," disregarded, because they are the work of "'Creole confection,'" and, further, because they can only "curve the dark naps of the sea," since the Canadian waves hold no significant claim in the history of transatlantic movement (Clarke, *Canticles I* 104). The speaker creates critical distance between Bannister's Canadian roots and American routes to expound the difficulty of enveloping a single national identity: "Yankify – yodel – your Canuck voice" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 104). As Burkitt explains, in the

postcolonial consciousness, "the nation remains the location of self-identification, yet adequate only as a component of a larger, fractured, sense of global identity" (8). Clarke's aversion to representing a whole and complete nation ultimately demonstrates that contemporary postcolonial poets weave together such disparate minority narrative threads and neglected histories into a diasporic tapestry.

The ability to represent a community rather than a dominant nation also arrives through the abandonment of the singular, prophetic "I." Traditionally employed in the classic epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, the first-person telling of the narrative emphasizes the "private emotion or affect" of a "collective narrative, one whose focus is on the community," but one which effectively inscribes "institutional power, which might also be described as empire" (Toohey 35, 36). The effect of this is a dominantly voiced narrative of community that purports to represent imperial projects. This epic tradition is eschewed through Clarke's employment of polyvocality, which, like the use of polyphony in Philip's *Zong!*, inundates phrases, words, and names with caesuras that Laurie R. Lambert calls a "poetics of reparation" (109). For example, in the poem "Declaration of the Independence of Liberia (1847)," Clarke inscribes dashes and spaces between the concepts of freedom in America and Liberians' prohibition from it:

> Prohibited from Congressing to progress –
>
> or to Preside over –
>
> *our* America,
>
> what we've constructed out our "Sambo" sweat –
>
> and unacknowledged black tears –

and forbidden *Freedom* itself –

the right to vote *and* revolt – (Clarke, *Canticles I* 39)

The epic catalogue for both postcolonial poets – Philip and Clarke – is therefore a "form that takes account not just of polyvocality and reiteration, but of the particular kinds of relationality and the commitment to destroy narrative" (Fehskens 411). In particular, Kathleen Crown explains that postcolonial poets "understand the human voice's capacity for dissociation and disarticulation as a reservoir for unclaimed experiences produced by the ruptures of the African diaspora" (220). In Philip's text, there is no lyric structure; in fact, the poetic content is so deconstructed that it results in a cacophony of floating voices, but for Clarke, this is an attractive feature that may be applied to the African-Canadian epic since it "must bear out a multicultural and multiracial discourse in a barbarous babble" ("Why Not" 137-8). As Clarke announces in the poem "Zanzibar: A Meditation on Slavery" in *Canticles I (MMXVI)*, "Each ship's a polyphony – / miscellaneous lingo –" (13). Representative of a moving group of nations and peoples, Clarke's epic, *Canticles I*, abounds with multilingual, multivalent heteroglossia. This is particularly evident in Clarke's use of italics, citations, and vernacular; for example, the poem "The New York Times *Uncovers Arson*" unearths multiple confessions that reveal confliction viewpoints. One speaker considers the slaves as "carnal saints," while another considers them as "bogus migrants, / fake refugees" and another "'subhuman devils'" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 86).

An unstable narrative perspective is iterated in both the text and the subtext of *Canticles I*; many of the poems assume authorial identities through the use of explicit naming to subvert the colonial subject. In "'Darwin's 'Natural Selection' Applied to Slaver Entertainment' (1859)," Clarke attributes the authorial hand of the poem to Mandingo Appolonius shortly following the

title; however, immediately after this line of authorship is an additional note: "(as told to Ambrose Dubose / *exclusive* to *The Miami Star*)" (130). The reader must first begin to deconstruct the multivalence ascribed by Clarke to the nature of the poem before even delving into its content. Initially, Darwin's seminal theory of Natural Selection considers a species' specific traits and how those that adapted to their environments are more likely to survive. We hear resonances of Darwin's theory as the speaker describes the transatlantic journey of those originating out of Africa and considerations "on who'd vanquish, who'd perish," and later identifies them to be "a sea-borne Caliban" black and barnacled (Clarke, *Canticles I* 130, 132). The supposed author of this poem, Mandingo Appolonius, is a fictional character; however, Mandingo is a reference to a nation of people who are descendants of the Mali Empire on the West Coast of Africa and now make up a significant population of Sierra Leone due to diasporic migration. Appolonius – double "P" and single "L" – is perhaps a spelling error quite in the style of Pound since Apollonius is a classical Greek term for prominent figures, artists, and thinkers during the early centuries. Combined, the narratives of Darwin and Mandingo emphasize the fact that the poem is more than twice removed from the origin – geographically and historically. Polyvocality and heteroglossia are not necessarily uncommon to the postcolonial epic; rather, these two rhetorical devices are prominently configured in Ezra Pound's infamous modernist epic, the *Cantos,* as Pound creates a series of sketchings, of vignettes, of *personae*, that punctuate each canto without providing unity. If Pound's epic comes to be defined through its modernist devices, such as through high allusion and stylistic fragmentation, then Clarke's postmodern and postcolonial epic builds upon these techniques to mark a new juncture in the tradition.

Language is deeply imbedded in the epic tradition, as the epic has often relayed the message and voice of a particular nation, and yet, a varied lexicon is also employed to convey a

vast setting covering many nations. Pound's use of Chinese ideograms in the *Cantos* "possess a potential for coherence" amidst a period of fragmentation because they are succinct expressions of the linguistic sphere (Johns-Putra 172). While Pound's accumulation of ideograms contribute to the abundance of *personae*, often in flux, the *Cantos* becomes impenetrable for the common audience in its hermeticism; recourse to scholarly commentary is almost inevitable for a close reader, and often intolerable for a casual reader. This quibble is addressed in the introductory section to the MMXVI volume of *Canticles I*, beginning with an epigraph from Pound directly: "The proper way to read is to run on when anything isn't comprehensible" (qtd. in Clarke ix). It would seem that Clarke is not concerned with Pound's use of disparate allusion; he claims that his "advice is joyously ignorable" since our postmodern era "furnishes us immediate encyclopaedias that make any noun, from any language, instantly accessible" (*Canticles I [MMXVI]* ix). However, Clarke interjects to note that his epic "offers sporadic sparks of elucidation" beyond footnotes and subtext in order to light the deepest caverns of history (*Canticles I [MMXVI]* ix). Clarke's peritextual elements, such as allusion and interjection, create a zone of liminality between the archival content and the reader and "reveal a pre-occupation with resistance even as they themselves resist generic and linguistic categorization and containment" (Larson 294). The end result is an epic in multiple volumes – an epic that is highly literary, but interspersed with didactic notes and compound cultural referents that are meant to guide the reader through complex subjects.

Canticles I, in some measure like Pound's *Cantos*, includes poems fully composed in languages such as Chinese and Spanish; however, Clarke's divergence from Pound's modernist epic is his emphasis on reader accessibility through the use of local translation. For example, the poem in *Canticles I (MMXVII)*, "Follow Martin, Follow Moses!," is first written in English, and

then is immediately translated into Italian, "Fai come Martin, fai come Moses!," when composed during his brief stay in Italy (Clarke 57). Clarke's employment of translation works on multiple registers, and is evidently understood through his use of explanatory footnotes. First, the use of translation emphasizes his epic project as one that is a species of travel writing, as the poem was composed on the Passio Per Formentera through the Strait of Gibraltar. Second, it contributes to his creative pursuit of being read on a community level, as it was translated by Fausto Ciompi at the University of Pisa (identified in a footnote of the translated poem), which directly correlates with Clarke's claims on community in the interview, "Epic as Gospel." Last, it complements the content of the piece, which deals with the uprising of the Austrians and final control of Venezia, Italia in 1848 in connection with the "slavery-abolishing rebellions led by Moses Robert and Martin Williams, that same year, in the Danish West Indies" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 54). The integration of Italian supplies another sphere to the diasporic map of abolition:

> *Revolution –*
>
> American, French, Haitian, and now
>
> the Danish Caribbean, St. Croix – (Clarke, *Canticles I* 54)

The use of local translation and the emphasis on travel writing rejects a stable perspective and rooted place, and, unlike Pound who causes professors to "slave over epic, the endless endnotes, / where what's original is illegible," Clarke makes the content of his epic widely accessible to a broad audience (*Canticles I* 436). Indeed, renewing old forms for revolution does not lie in the abstract, but rather in the relational – Clarke's emphasis on being "read by his own community" encompasses both the literary academic sphere and the geographically local domain (Compton 158). While these interpretations are arrived at by close reading, Clarke's translations aid in the reader's navigation, whereas Pound's unannounced incorporation of multiple languages and

insistence that barrelling through that which is not understood makes the text impermeable to a casual reader.

Other poems in both volumes of *Canticles I* are interspersed with select French words, usually to typify the African diaspora and Acadian settlement, and other times to create a lyrical, rhythmic swing. For example, in the poem "Anatomy of *La Ille Republique* (1870)," Clarke writes from the perspective of Alexandre Dumas, fils.[4] Considering the ramifications of the third Republic that established many French colonial territorial possessions, the speaker extends the compass of imperial rule: "Paris – *Metropole* – cries to its colonies, / 'Mo' cocoa, coffee, cocaine *encore*'" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 238). Further stressing transatlantic movement and assimilation, the speaker explains to the "*Frere*" that to "go from Martinique to France – / come from Egypt to France –," is to "enter a maelstrom of broken mirrors" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 238). As a result, the poem is peppered with French turns of phrase that are easily decipherable by a non-bilingual reader, such as those found in the line "of *liberte, egalite, fraternite* –" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 236). Weaving in sparse words of other languages, whether it is French, Latin, German, or Maltese, Clarke emphasizes his transnational project with an emphasis on accessibility. The footnotes explicate that which is beyond common knowledge, while those examples in context enrich the content of the poem at hand.

Like many poets before him, over the pages of *Canticles I*, Clarke spills the ink of the past, along with the blood of those literary and historical figures that constructed or contributed to it, through words or through life. Significantly, it is 'black ink' penned to aged (white) paper, a motif that recurs throughout *Canticles I* to comment upon the task of inscribing black absences into a pre-existing canon and body of historiography. This also extends to a literary continuity,

[4] In the footnote to the poem, Clarke attributes this penmanship to: "Fanon, always Fanon" (236).

an epic lineage of sorts, as in the penultimate poem of *Canticles I (MXVII)*, "Extro: Reverie & Reveille," Clarke not only speaks directly to past epic poets Homer, Milton, Dante, Pound, and Walcott, but also to his audience: "Auditor: I Hear my forebears –" (436). This task of creating a web of relationality is ultimately that of the epic poet, and underscores Clarke's insistence on working within the epic tradition. "The tense but interdependent engagements between the 'pre-text' and their postcolonial offspring," Burkitt argues, "illustrates the 'discursive' element which refutes a strictly binary relationship" (5). The epic is therefore an essential mode for Clarke's *Canticles I* as it is a way to recover silenced narratives and lost voices while enacting canonical resistance. Clarke opens up an echo chamber of fragmentation where excluded voices seep into the cracks of a splintered "*History*" – in Clarke's italicized use of it – to engage in a dialectical arena with subjects of the past who continue to inform the present, and to (re)configure an African-Canadian body of literature in canonical and historical subjects.

Chapter 2: (W)ringing Out "Black" Noise: Voice and the Lyric Subject

In an open letter to Derek Walcott, Clarke writes: "I thank you for pioneering a way of blackening English. … You cannibalize the Canon and invite your brethren and sistren [sic] to the intoxicating, exhilarating feast" (17). Elsewhere, Clarke pays homage to Walcott while analyzing his own authorial voice: "My voice be a lot of bitter roaring, eh?" (*Canticles I* 438); "I had to sing – or wring out – *black* noise … *Oui,* eh?" (*Black* 25). These complementary inscriptions accentuate Clarke's polemical project of (re)presenting voice throughout his creative works and centrally in *Canticles I*, with an emphasis on localizing the African-Canadian nation language within previous narrative accounts. This is primarily achieved through dialogue – dramatic, dynamic, audacious – and facilitated by form; the variegated lyricism of *Canticles I* creates a cacophony of voices.

An interrogation of voice is enacted throughout the two volumes in order to supplant the subjective individual within an objectively broader discourse, particularly of concern in regards to racial minorities: "where is our voice? How do we fit in? What do we do with it? We are forced into a kind of negotiation with the master tropes, master genres, master language" (Clarke qtd. in Compton 142). The epic's firmly grounded position in vocality is largely constituted by the origin of *epos*; it "shares its etymological root with the Latin *vox*," and, in the case of Clarke's *Canticles*, it is perhaps best connected with the Latin phrase *vox populi* – the voice of the people (Henriksen 11). As Laurence Steven explains, "Clarke develops the improvisational, appropriative style of his extended lyric sequence as a tragicomic response to the death of epic" (101). Although the epic mode is less prevalent in contemporary poetry, Clarke asserts that "its grandeur and power [still] persists in our era in the extended lyric sequence" (*Whylah Falls* xvi-xvii). The death of the epic, and moreover, the absence of the Other – in this case African-

Canadians – are conditions that require Clarke to improvise, imagine, and appropriate. This becomes his method; in *Wylah Falls* he sets out "to improvise a myth" wherein the "narrative emerges from the lyrical" (xi). The epic form, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a form that necessitates an ever-going negotiation with past discourses, and yet, it provides a narrative framework in which the dominant, master voice may be challenged.

As we consider the minority racialized narrative voice in poetic works, we may turn to both Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Both authors provide a theoretical basis for such a study, and examine postcolonial tropes in discourses that ultimately usurp a hegemonic voice traditionally imparted in Western, and, more relevantly, colonial, literature. What complicates this activity for postcolonial writers is their often-hyphenated racial status. For example, "Walcott's dilemma is that, by writing in English, he risks turning his back on his African origins" (Johns-Putra 181). Similarly, while George Elliott Clarke's African ancestry is seven generations back, the recognition of African-Canadians as a racial category has been virtually non-existent in dominant discourse and is instead foregrounded within the history of slavery in the United States. More specifically, being a hyphenated Canadian draws attention to the nation's bilingualism, which is particularly highlighted in the little settlement of Africadians in Nova Scotia. Language and voice are not merely a simple mitigation of dominant discourses, but also demand a certain authorial recognition of one's own voice.

Clarke specifically employs not just a distinctly unilingual voice in *Canticles I*, but rather a flood of voices that operate within lyricism. It is a harking back to historical events with a particular awareness of the subversive potential when configured in a resistant opus. Moreover,

Clarke maintains the African-Canadian "orature" tradition in his epic project, which, Clarke explains in the essay "Bring Da Noise: The Poetics of Performance, *chez* d'bi.young and Oni Joseph," is because such a poet "produces poems that are really songs […] whose intent is to communalize, uplift, and educate the audience" (58). We hear in *Canticles I* a collection of verses – Biblical and choral – that, Clarke writes, are "Voices from a hearse. / Biblical leaves curl / Like lips set to snarl" (Clarke 436). These voices are resurrected through resistance, set to devour the pages of historical texts, documents, and literature. The "curl" of the pages, mirrored in the "lips" of the speaker(s), is an "ingenious expedient foregrounding truth as artifice" (Kamboureli 31). Examining the rhetoric that is employed throughout *Canticles I* in conjunction with Clarke's own performative mode stresses that these texts are meant to be read aloud, recited rhapsodically, to maintain the Africadian "tradition of hymn composition" (*Fire on the Water* 20). Lyricism, in the context of Clarke's postcolonial epic, thus comes to connote a mode of orature, of folklore, that extends beyond the historical catalogue.

It is crucial to reiterate here what Clarke proclaims in the introductory sections of both *Canticles I (MMXVI)* and *(MMXVII)*: the project is first described as a "lyric-structured epic" (ix). While the lyric tends to exist *a priori* of the epic – Frye separately groups the "generic terms drama, epic, and lyric" – the lyrical impulse is inscribed within many contemporary epics, such as Pound's *Cantos* and Walcott's *Omeros* (qtd. in Kamboureli 63). Conventionally, lyricism in poetry expresses personal emotions or feelings, which are rooted in the subjective first-person account. Clarke announces that his interest in the lyric is that it is allows for a "voice orchestrating an arrangement of words that are held together by emotion and ideas – an arrangement that is meant to be transcendent, uplifting, inspiring, provoking, provocative …" (qtd. in Grant 70). By making audible the "I," lyric poetry inserts a linguistic code of meaning,

particularly the "individuating inflection of language" within a system of signs and signifiers (Blasing 30). The lyric "I," Mutlu Konuk Blasing additionally points out, "re-sounds the originary mediation of the mother tongue that makes for the socializing/individuating history of a subject" (45). In essence, the lyric "I," by entering into symbolic language, connects one's lived history with the signs that constitute it. Crossing this threshold of semiotics entails that personal memories, histories, and lived experiences as spoken by the poet are wholly individual, and yet accessed by others through language. The indexical function of the "I" in poetry means that the lyric enables the poet to share a common subjectivity through the shared code of language, even if those experiences being translated are idiosyncratic. If the epic looks back into history, the "I," in conjuring history, also "holds the possibility for recall, and lyric poetry reverberates that history of 'forgetfulness'" (Blasing 47). The immediateness of the lyric "I" "validates not so much what is remembered but the act of remembering itself, not the 'true' origins of a bygone past but the subject's 'process of becoming'" (Kamboureli 59). As Kathleen Crown further adds, such "haunted speakings and impossible utterances are acts of critical memory and history-making" that embodies "disarticulation as a reservoir for unclaimed experiences produced by the ruptures of the African diaspora" (220-21).

This act of remembering is heard in the voices of many of Clarke's creative works. The theme of cultural exile directly intersects nostalgia, such as in the poem "Look Homeward, Exile" in *Whylah Falls*, wherein the speaker called "X" not only foreshadows the death of Clemence and Othello, but also contemplates how the land holds those markers of what once was, and what ceases to be:

I can still see that soil crimsoned by butchered

Hog and imbrued with rye, lye, and homely

Spirituals everybody must know (Clarke xxx)

Here, X identifies the turmoil caused by colonialism, which, for speaker X and the community to which they belong, is immediately affective. The land remains stained with past spilled blood, and continues to surface out of the natural environment – it is at once past and present. The poem evokes emotions, such as "Depression" and "hurt," and conjoins it with the imagery of the local community of Nova Scotians. Spirituals, one of the pillars upon which African-Canadian literature is founded since "the achievement of identify in African literature is akin to the discovery of God and the creation of (comm)unity," are embedded throughout the poem to assert unity and freedom (Clarke, *Fire on the Water* 13). However, though X "remember[s] my Creator in the old ways," the speaker finds that despite this strong yearning for something familiar, whether it be geographical, spiritual, or social, "nothing warms [their] wintry exile" (xxxi). Thus, "Look Homeward, Exile," which is a play on Thomas Wolfe's 1929 novel *Look Homeward, Angel*, explicates the narrative of a suffering community by voicing the interiority of the displaced subject. Given that Clarke's creative writing originates from a profound sense of cultural deracination, it is not surprising that it – inclusive of *Canticles I* – establishes a "thorough identification between the voice of the poems and the condition of homelessness" (Banks 67).

Individual remembering through lyricism, evident in the poems of *Whylah Falls*, also subsequently functions to evoke and provoke cultural memory. Eva Müller-Zettelmann defines this as "a body of culture-specific knowledge focusing on the past, which, through its assessment of a community's shared history, governs the way a society will perceive itself and the world" (360). This is particularly problematic for Clarke's African-Canadian epic project since Africville has been rendered obsolete through colonial practice. When we speak of an African-

Canadian society, we find that it lacks reinforcement. Indeed, Clarke, in comparing the Canadian black identity to that in the United States, explains that disparate racialization – or rather, the small population of blacks in Canada – means large political systems are inaccessible, and so "Afrocentrism has to be lived intellectually, spiritually, [and] psychologically" (qtd. in Wayde Compton 60). Further, since this collective cultural memory is dependent on a "culture- and epoch-specific corpus of *canonized texts* through repeated consumption of which a society will stabilise and mediate its collective self-image," the cultural community of African-Canadians often comes to be defined by those documents that inscribe them in colonial history (my emphasis, Müller-Zettelmann 360). In order to negotiate this problematic claim, Clarke inscribes forgotten narratives by fictionalizing the lyric voice while retaining its historical accuracy from an Africadian-centred account, as evident in the poems of *Canticles I*.

Lyricism, in association with *Canticles I*, comes to be defined by its changing, individuating "I." As a topos of the lyric, there exists a "seemingly unmediated consciousness or agency, perhaps even of a 'persona' as the fictional origin of the text" (Muller-Zettelmann and Rubik 27). The lyric voice is exercised by Clarke to appropriate the speaking subject while harking back to its traditional use in the epic mode. As Kamboureli explains in *On the Edge of Genre*, it is not a complete lyric, but "it is a lyric fracturing its 'wholeness,' parodying its own lyrical impulse; it functions more as a trope than as a genre" (64). Joseph Riddel further emphasizes the lyric's self-reflexive interrogation of its structure and form:

> The lyric, then, undoes its own frame, or repeats the "force" of framing with its own metaphorical violence – a play of displacements which the modern "long poem" only makes explicit. The lyric is irreducibly temporal, a text never present to itself. It represents the flaw of myths of origin. (467)

The lyric's own 'undoing' of the poem's content and construction is evidently present in *Canticles I*, such as in "The Narrative of Lincoln States [Not His Real Name]." The speaker of the poem begins by pondering the contours of his persona established through childhood: "I can't remember my first steps, / my first words. / But I'm Imbangala" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 160). As the speaker continues to recall the gruesome and volatile conditions of the transatlantic slave trade, he landmarks the violence enacted upon him and his people of Angola through his age: "(I was all of seven years, / approximately)" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 161). The memory of this violence is, however, fragmented and recalled later through coloured slides: "I remember only vignettes: / red gore, black flesh, green fields, / gangrened flesh, burnt-sienna fields, black ichor" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 162). His sale and movement between slavers leads to a disintegration of self, and undoes the frame of his own identity, such as when he's eighteen years of age and transported to New Orleans: "Again, I'm no person, / just a purchase, / a thing retitled 'Antony'" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 164). As the poem progresses, the speaker does not revel in his personal emotions of the atrocities enacted upon them due to their race; instead, the speaker utilizes the lyric voice to fracture a "whole" rendering of history and cultural memory and to bluntly bring the reader's social consciousness to the forefront:

> Now, my European, Caucasian readers,
> I ask you,
> Why do white folk do what they do?
> You must admit out loud,
> you often concoct a scheming *Mafia*,
> spurred on by genocidal *Greed*. (Clarke, *Canticles I* 175)

The lyric voice in this poem does not attempt to remember in entirety, nor is it the essential speaker; instead, it flips the script to subject the white audience to realization, calling such audience out as the perpetrators of violence. Undoing the neat frame of colonialism, it emphasizes that the point, or myth, of origin for America – the speaker identifies that this commences with "Columbus" – begins and ends with an unbridled string of acts of injustice: "*encomienda*" (slavery) and genocide (Clarke, *Canticles I* 175).

Due to the polyphonic nature of *Canticles I*, it is uncommon to hear Clarke as the lyric subject, although his authorial influence is ubiquitously present. This might be because, as Kathleen Crown explains, the "work of re-memory requires that the poet enter into the shock of dissociation and thus establishes an ambiguous relation to voice" (224). The ultimate poem of *Canticles I (MXVII)*, "Polemical 'Conclusion,'" is one of the few times the reader encounters Clarke's raw, self-addressed voice; however, it seems that Clarke himself is not at ease with his lyric "I": "What's the value of my first-person address, / ie., 'I'?" (438). The value, one could argue, comes in his rhetorical performance – both on the page and orally. This is primarily where Clarke and Pound overlap in the aesthetic of their respective epic poems. Ayon Maharaj offers a useful critical term for the lyric modalities that intersect the poetics of both Clarke and Pound. In analyzing Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, Maharaj rejects the distinct categorical binaries of subjectivism and objectivism to describe the blend between the historical and lyrical modes as "transpersonal lyricism": these moments "often double as intricate reflexive meditations on the powers and limits of aesthetic experience" (73). Transpersonal lyricism thereby creates a "sociocultural theatre" to amalgamate autobiographical details and the reader's awareness to engage social conditions. This is heard throughout the collection of *Canticles I*, but nowhere is it more palpable than in the progression of the poem "Polemical 'Conclusion'":

So, how is my Deity not “shabby,”
given the bounty of horrors
and the poverty of miracles
allotted our number,

we “blacks” with changeable names –
names that belong to comic-book heroes
(“Malcolm X”) –
and unchanging deaths? (Clarke 439)

Clarke configures his lyric voice with the greater “we” of “blacks” to demonstrate how historical documents and the literary canon brand their names as interchangeable – how there is no divine intervention in the chronology of their reprehensible narratives, but offers his lyric voice as an intervention in these “unchanging deaths.”

Clarke’s detached style of lyricism may be traced back to his invocation of Pound’s aesthetic, particularly his identification of rhythmic cadence in his own writing, which is described as “‘a composition of words set to music’” and further inscribed in Pound’s Imagist doctrines as “compos[ing] in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (qtd. in Grant 70; qtd. in Johns-Putra 172). And, according to Pound, the rhythmic “I” in language is “uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” and the primary force that “makes audible an intending “‘I’” (qtd. in Blasing 55). Clarke’s personal lyricism is masked by the abundance of personae that he evokes and appropriates in *Canticles I*, yet the rhythmic “I” abounds in the poems’ versification. Critics such as H. Nigel Thomas and Katherine McLeod have extensively covered the lyrical musicality of Clarke’s past poetic works. Both Thomas and McLeod convey

that his rhythmic cadence, and some aspects of his employment of blues and jazz, are integral to the macrostructure and texture of his poetry. It is generally agreed that Clarke's melodical, rhapsodical verses – spun by the lyrical subject – "links the community [of Africadians] to a quite different tradition, that of the 'black Atlantic'" (Sanders 116). This is because, as Clarke himself makes clear in *Fire on the Water*, Africadia, along with the African diaspora, is a "community wherein spirituals and secular songs inform and influence each other" (20). When employed harmoniously, the musical modalities "function synechdocally as signifiers of the stoicism blues have come to encode for African Americans," while the "moments of dissonance," such as in jazz sections, postulate critical spaces for identity re-formation (Thomas 71; McLeod 191). What is consistent between the two modes is the way in which they enact cultural listening – in Clarke, the poetic subject, the reader, and the audience. The two modes are meant to be voiced orally and heard aurally; this is essential to *Canticles I*, and embedded in Clarke's overall creative practice: "I sound out every word, every phrase, and every sentence before I commit a work to publication" (qtd. in Grant 70).

In assessing Clarke's use of the extended lyric sequence to represent transculturation, Laurence Steven explains, "each [voice] takes its place in Clarke's rhetorical performance, dramatically offering implicit, free-contrapuntal commentary on the melody line" (107). The harmonious reflection of the lyric sequence, along with Clarke's own characterization of his writing in *Canticles I* as a fortuitous voice self-arranged into a narrative, are placed into direct conflict with the subversive, and at times brazenly vulgar, language precisely employed throughout *Canticles I*, along with the improvisational techniques that serve as cultural markers of African diasporic writing. To this end, Siemerling explains that "transcultural improvisation can adapt and appropriate existing archives, materials, and techniques," and, in the case of

Canticles I, personas, all of which "unsettle the time flows and circulation patterns of 'traditional' rooted cultures (339, 341). It is true that Clarke frequently improvises his material; in the introduction, Clarke claims that *Canticles I* emerges out of a type of spontaneous imagining – one that is embedded in a historical and social conscious. In the genealogy of his writing, what Clarke "strives to grasp in his extended lyric sequence, is both the modernist lament for the epic vision … and the postmodern recognition of identity formation as *bricolage, metissage*, improvisation, jazz, or *gumbo*" (my emphasis, Steven 103).

Nowhere in the collection of *Canticles I (MMXVII)* is this illustrated more prominently than in the poem "Longfellow's 'Black Snake Blues'":

> Let Hiawatha molest a guitar;
> worry strings as if stirring mud:
> His mumbo jumbo's nothing but gumbo'd muck
> cause his heart's a distress of blood –
> a pitter-patter, splattered amount –
> for a blanket-blank Godiva dubs him "no-count."
> …
> Evangeline be a two-buck,
> buck-tooth whore.
> outta Acadia, y'all
> (outpost of *accidie*)
>
> *Mmm, mmm, mmm.*

Hiawatha remember, he remember (Clarke 152)

In the above extract, Clarke initially appropriates the lyric voice of American poet Henry Wordsworth Longfellow and the oral attributes of his 1855 epic work, *The Song of Hiawatha*; however, the title of the poem and the bluesy nature that runs throughout it are evocative of Victoria Spivey's 1926 "race" song, "Black Snake Blues." Subtext and allusion are thus integral to understanding the shape of the poem, as the two in tandem link the eradication of Native Americans during the colonial period to American slavery. We hear the long drawl of blues through the internal rhyme in "mumbo," "jumbo," and "gumbo," and again in "pitter-patter" and "splattered." The reversal of tonal inflection in "two-buck" and "buck-tooth" creates not only a musical dissonance, but also satirically plays on the cost of the woman and her unseemly appearance from her torpor – derived from "*accidie*" – and her Acadian background. The italicized interjection of multiple moan-like "*mmm*" can be read as a sexual comment on the woman, Evangeline, and, more ardently, it creates an oral, improvisational moment akin to that commonly interspersed throughout blues music. It is a moment of interlude – a fragmentary moment separate from the body of verse that predates the speaker's recollection. As an exponent of both the lyric mode and traditional blues music, Clarke employs repetition in "remember, he remember," and again at the close of the poem in the morose exclamation that "She gonna love someone else, someone else. / She gonna love someone else!" (*Canticles I* 153).

What the reader encounters in a poem like "Longfellow's 'Black Snake Blues'" is a medley of lyrical techniques that uniquely weave together historical and canonical referents and the black experience. Contemporary black Canadian writing ultimately foregrounds conceptual boundaries to mark African-derived cultural forms, such as eruptions of the speaking voice, performance, and dub aesthetics. Of the latter, dub aesthetics combine all registers of the

emphatic speaker – word, sound and power – to present an "aesthetic of information with a political purpose," one charged with cultural and racial incongruities (Allen qtd. in Habekost 149). Considerations of vernacular and dub aesthetics thus signify upon, and counter, constrictive representations of the black experience in dominant canonical and historical discourses. For example, inherent within African oral traditions and extended throughout the African diaspora, dub aesthetics are often "Dubbed – as in *Zoology* – a 'squeaky monkey'" in Western classifications (Clarke, *Canticles I* 294). By refusing to normalize authoritarian language and by "dubbing" upon traditional discourses – such as the anthropological field of "*Zoology*" – Clarke politically intervenes in the portrayal of the black experience. Carol Morrell cites black Canadian writers' political intervention as their "distinctive contribution to Canadian literature, [in that they] insert their own and *other* voices into what has (following the European tradition) been considered the 'high culture' of poetry" (13). In *Black*, Clarke contemplates how such language may be utilized: "Balderdash and *braggadocio*: what English is – / Squabbling cabals in Bibles and newspapers – / A tongue that cannibalizes all other tongues" (18). In this instance, Clarke pays homage to Walcott's 'blackening English' by dubbing upon the written and spoken word; braggadocio evokes multitudinous references, from the character Braggadocchio in Edmond Spenser's *The Faerie Queene,* to a genre of rap music, to a form of typeface. Clarke's admixture of multiple levels of rhetoric and obtrusive polyvocality aids in viewing the African diaspora – and ultimately Canada – as a web of interrelation and interjection.

The use of polyvocality and heteroglossia consequently infiltrates the essential speaking subject throughout *Canticles I* and its mechanisms destabilize a presiding perspective. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin explain that "polyglossic or 'polydialectical' communities" (their principal example is the Caribbean) are places "where a multitude of

dialects interweave to form a generally comprehensible linguistic continuum" (39). Hybridization may be a modest term to describe such a phenomenon, but it carries with it connotations of a hyphenated, or doubled, self. Since "[d]oubleness … is the essence of the immigrant experience …; caught between two cultures and often languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space" that does not necessarily asynchronously bridge two beings, but instead blends them into the literary structure (Hutcheon qtd. in Morrell 9). Donna Bennett therefore proposes a suitable term beyond hybridity: "*polybridity* – a neologism … as a way of describing inheritance from more sources than two and also as a way to suggest that the complexities of inheritance must be understood as not just in terms of the gene pool but also as describing influences and cultural mixing" (12). Polybridity comes to the surface through Clarke's recurrent use of polyvocality; *Canticles I* weaves together different dialects, languages, and lived experiences to disrupt a continuous narrative flow. Polybridity thus registers through two primary modes in the collection: appropriated voices and heteroglossic dialogues.

Of the former use of polybridity, Clarke's appropriation of voices demonstrates the "prophetic power of language to resurrect" and reconstruct (Steven 116). In the poem, "III. The Fire Sermon," Clarke, from a proximate distance, assumes the surrogate voice of T.S. Eliot by referencing the third section of *The Waste Land*, which is in turn mediated by the "German translation by Paul Celan (1947)" (*Canticles I* 412). Eliot's original poem, which is rich in allusion and polyvocality itself, thus becomes translated from a representation of modern-day decadence and the destruction of the natural world to a world engulfed by death and fire during the Holocaust. The poem adjusts many of Eliot's original lines to emphasize this, such as in its gashouse imagery. See here how Eliot's lines are paralleled through echoes while marking its difference:

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

… On a winter evening behind the gashouse

… White bodies naked on the low damp ground

And bones cast in a little low dry garret (*The Waste Land* 67)

(Sweet Mediterranean, flow softly, till I end my song) –

The smell of the industrious smokestacks!

Each belch, non-stop, is another person

disappeared into ash. (Clarke, *Canticles I* 413)

Therefore, in Celan's re-reading of Eliot, the decay of the natural world is attributed to the genocidal destruction enacted during the Holocaust, while Clarke's re-reading of *both* Eliot and Celan connects their respective themes to the larger African diaspora (the "Mediterranean" and "North Sea") and the unnecessary violence enacted upon blacks (through his paraphrasing of the "Negriod 'witch'" accusation in Salem of 1692). Not only does Clarke retain the content and form of many of *The Waste Land*'s features through appropriation, but also the exact language of Eliot: the "forc'd" sounds of nature, "Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug," is expanded by Clarke to allude to the final sounds of the dying body, "Jugular veins sweet / Chug chug chug chug chug chug chug" (*The Waste Land* 67-8; *Canticles I* 414). As a whole, Clarke renders Eliot's profuse Eurocentric allusions – Spenser's refrain of Thames in *Prothalamion* and the evocation of Queen Elizabeth I, for example – into the perpetrators of mass genocide upon oppressed racial groups: Jews and blacks of the African diaspora.

The latter register of polybridity in the form of heteroglossic dialogues allows for a direct call-and-response between the two figures in the poem and highlights the incongruities of their social status. This is most evident in the poem "Harriet Tubman & Harriet Beecher Stowe: A

Debate," as it juxtaposes two prominent idols named Harriet who were abolitionists of roughly the same period, but who advocated for abolition and experienced slavery in very polarizing ways. In the poem, the two debate the political power of literature, inclusive of fictional, biblical, and historical categories. Stowe attempts to convince Tubman that the gravity of words hold just as much force as actions, saying "Tis best to blast ink cross paper, / than tinkle inklings of swords" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 96). The proper English of Stowe, such as in the prior quoted lines, makes her argument more fragile, and marks her difference from Tubman. On the power of words, Stowe opens by saying that poets "finagle verses that lilt of *Struggle*," to which Tubman swiftly retorts that "Poets clad poop with blossoms" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 95). This is, certainly, a response to Stowe's own condemnation for being conventionally regarded as an abolition activist despite never feeling the force of slavery directly; instead, she inundates *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with sentimental values of Christian love. But, as Tubman – a slave who experiences slavery through physical pain and action – identifies, even the Christian bible contradicts that which it emblematizes: "The words were harsh: / *Obey, repent, or perish!*" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 96). In its totality, the poem conflates morals with lived experience through implied experiences of race.

Polyvocality in *Canticles I* does not simply entail the often-unannounced arrival of a variety of personas, but it further rewrites the same, or a similar, narrative from a multitude of perspectives. Following M. NourbeSe Philip's style of poetic disruption in *Zong!*, Clarke inundates his text with polyvocality to "purposely create disorder and interrupt meaning" within a panoptic historical catalogue (Fehskens 410). In the successive trifecta of poems in the MMXVII collection, "Overheard at The Berlin Conference (1884-85)," "Partial Transcript of The Berlin Conference (1884-85)," and "Repressed Transcript of The Berlin Conference (1884-85)," Clarke offers the audience three alternate narrative trajectories that each exhibit varying

levels of mediation. Since each poem is extensive in length, it would be arduous to directly cite sizeable sections; therefore, in the following sections I simply reference striking structural features and sporadic quotations of these re-writings to illustrate my point that Clarke deliberately delineates the narrative of an important historical event through polyvocality in order to usurp colonial claims.

Throughout the three poems, there are a multitude of countries voiced, which includes – in no particular order – Great Britain, Portugal, the United States, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and Japan. At the forefront, this list might seem problematic since it does not include Canada; however, it must be remembered that Canada, at that time in the late nineteenth-century a country less than twenty-years of age (established in 1867), was not an international political player since it fell under the umbrella of the monarchy of England. Foregrounding these three poems is also the historical allusion to the Berlin Conference, also referred to as the Congo, or West Africa Conference; it regulated European trade and colonization during the period of colonial expansion by European powers – otherwise branded New Imperialism. Textually, the titles – "Overheard," "Partial Transcript," and "Repressed Transcript" – allude to three levels of removal from the actual historical document – the implied "truthful" transcript – and mark the incursion of Clarke's authorial mediation.

The first poem, "Overheard at the Berlin Conference (1884-85)," primarily surveys the colonies' discussion on assimilating Africans – "Africa will be less savage and Africans less black" – through European Christian values and white morality, and the commodification of their goods and people since "*Progress* means tapping Congo copper, diamonds, and rubber, / while

depraved, dark souls hosanna our paleface deity" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 259).[5] The countries continue to bargain with one another for the right to colour the land with their flag, and in doing so expose the faults of their nations, mostly critiquing the United States for its "Uncle Sam" mentality. Whereas "Overheard" is composed through varied narrative interjections, the ensuing poem, "Partial Transcript of the Berlin Conference (1884-85)," takes up a rhyme scheme very near to consistent couplets, but, self-reflexively resistant to form, it at times switches into alternating rhyming couplets. This poem condenses many of the themes presented in the one prior, while being much shorter and more direct. The countries offer definitive statements on negating single ownership over Africa, and thus the harmonious riff offers consolation of a "real peace treaty," one which denies "poaching each other's colonies" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 265). If "Overheard" represents conversational banter between the countries, then "Partial Transcript" represents an extract of the complete dialogue.

The final of the three series of poems, "Repressed Transcript of the Berlin Conference (1884-85)," signals a shift to that which has been explicitly kept off the record, or hidden away from the burdened conscience. Simultaneously, its poetic style changes to that of the Gothic; from the onset, the French Republic presents the image of the macabre, as, after a near treaty of peace, "Poe's raven threw itself blackly / gainst the window" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 267). The countries participate in a dramatic interchange, and they associate the grotesque actions of colonialism with that of players on the performative stage: "Psychopaths love their slaughters / as much as actors love death scenes" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 267). The Japanese Empire, as an idle "observer" and the only non-Eurocentric country participating in the dialogue, provides a

[5] Clarke inserts a footnote here in *Canticles I*, which gives "tapping" an alternate meaning of "raping." This is heard again in the subsequent poem, "Partial Transcript," wherein France declares that, in addition to pillaging natural resources, they'll "bust female savages' hymens / and hang high each nagging nigger" (266).

dramatically marked aside to ask the audience, in the midst of the Eurocentric countries' morose poetics on the African status, "[i]s *Whiteness* itself a dishonest *Complexion*, / a perfidious *Complex*?" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 270). Clarke's peritextual elements in this poem create a zone of liminality between the archival content and the reader to "reveal a pre-occupation with resistance even as they themselves resist generic and linguistic categorization and containment" (Larson 294). The use of polyvocality in the series of Berlin Conference poems decentres the historical catalogue through disorder and meaning remaking, and, referring back to Clarke's introductory section, "layer[s] events and actors" to destabilize the notion of a singular catalogue (*Canticles I* x).

As a separation from the monoglossic use of English, polyglossic postcolonial writing intervenes to reconstruct language from the centre as an act of resistance. It is, in itself, a site of difference, or in the postmodern terms of Jacques Derrida, *differance*. Additionally, Arun Mukherjee notes that this, in the context of Canadian racial minority narratives, may be considered "racial difference," which creates "parodic forms" that are "ceremonial acts of rejection" from the categorizations of the dominant, white society (75). In response, postcolonial discourse attempts to develop a "poetics of resistance" that is "unplaceable, irreducible, and subversive" (Budde 285). In his essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Homi Bhabha argues that postcolonial writers may critique the centre of language only by first appropriating it through Otherness:

> [it is] *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence;* in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. … [It is] the sign

> of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. (126)

The Other is thus an excluded object whose absent presence provides the means to employ parody, apostrophe, and prosopopoeia. Within a postcolonial theoretical framework, "the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre … marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege" (Ashcroft et al. 39). Rhetorical tropes such as irony, satire, and repetition, in the context of postcolonial epic poetry, are subversive techniques to usurp essentialist claims about race and lived experiences.

Canticles I frequently evinces rhetorical tropes of narrative disruption that ultimately challenge oppressive archives while elucidating Clarke's "poetics of resistance." I offer an extension of Robert Budde's "poetics of resistance" to align it with a rhetoric of resistance. This comes to be defined in terms of the subversive rhetorical techniques that are commonly employed by contemporary black writers, of which Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of signifyin(g) is essential. Harking back to Fanon's theory of mimicry, Gates writes: "By supplanting the received term's associated concept" of white signifying, of the precise chain between signified/signifier, the black vernacular tradition's "complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle–class white people" (67). Signifyin(g) is accordingly "a trope, in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes)" (Gates 52). Writing within this ritual of a rhetoric of resistance provides a robust means of deconstructing oppressive language through the appropriation – and mimicry – of it.

A poem in *Canticles I* that directs the reader's attention to this subversive method is "Paul Laurence Dunbar Selects a Theme." The poem speaks to the African-American poet's

difficulty of positioning himself within the dominant canon due to his inclination to employ black English. The tension that arises out of Dunbar's own creative conflict of "producing the Dixie jingles his audiences craved and the 'serious' verse that would win him critical claim – and canonical claim" is voiced through his "tinny, dubious poetics" in the poem (Clarke, *Canticles I* 292). He consequently positions himself as the Other, "[b]eing a Negro or ('negativized') poet," he can "only echo / British Library, hardcover bards / (hardy as Hardy: / *Hardy-har-har*)" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 292). This is maintained throughout the poem as he is placed in the "(shadow of Apollo)" and the "(shade of Artemis)" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 293). As Dunbar self-deprecates his literary status, his dialect simultaneously reverts back into the "Negro dialect" that he so frequently employed throughout his career in order to ironically critique master dialogue:

> My br'er poets, yes, I'd like to be
>
> *primus inter pares*,
>
> … But I'm a "Yahoo *de* verse," eh?
>
> Check my "gasping wit" and "gut scream."
>
> It's as hard for me "to carry a tune
>
> as it is for a nigger to carry an election."
>
> My jottings "strike up a medley of crow
>
> and harmonica: Mockeries of English!" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 293, 294)

By arranging himself directly within critical discourse, Dunbar signifies upon the classification of his poetics in order to enact a rhetoric of resistance against it. Hyperbolically appropriating and intoning the voices of critics, the poem foregrounds the Other as one that diachronically intersects both the white and black linguistic realms.

Naturally, a discussion of the Other and the rhetoric of resistance that the contemporary black writer explores in seeking to represent the Other leads to the particularity of vernacular that is employed in order to sound the voice of a specific racial minority group. As Arun Mukherjee explains, the "ironic mode used by non-white Canadians is parodic and juxtapositional: it echoes and mocks the acts and words of dominant Canadians" (71). The ironic mode, M. NourbeSe Philip contests, at once converges with the inability to express oneself using an imperial language:

> It was a language of commands, orders, and punishments. This language – english in my case, but it applies to all the languages of those European countries involved in the colonialist project – was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. (Philip, "Interview" 196)

Whereas for Philip the solution to speaking comfortably in English lies in a "decontaminating process," for Clarke it is quite the inverse: it is an explicit process of contamination, of blackening. For Clarke in *Canticles I*, and in several of the other works that comprise his creative oeuvre, it is a "blackening of English," as recalled in the preface to this chapter. Clarke writes in *Odysseys Home* that the idiosyncratic black English of Africadians has been denigrated and suppressed, with their vernacular being "treated as foreign, substandard, and deviant," and even miscategorized as "*American* and *Southern*" (86). Therefore, he largely identifies with Derek Walcott's technique of inscribing black English since it is at once authentic to the writer's voice, and resistant to the typical categorization within a society and its literature. Since language is the primary indicator of one's lived experience, an adherence to "proper English" binds the writer to an inauthentic history:

> Words enter history, language is a product of history, a history read as violence. Language is therefore a testimony of an imposed and violent civilization that the black poet encounters, which he refuses and rebels against. Instead of the sweet syllables of one's mother tongue, the poet experiences the harshness of words that hurt the lips and break the jaws that pronounce them. (Marra 154)

In part three of the poem "Language," which comes from Clarke's collection *Black*, the collision between this style of "proper" English and one's authentic voice are expressed:

> That bang, blackening, of English syllables
> In my black-black mouth hurts,
> Them syllables hurt,
> So I can only vomit up speech –
> Half-digested English –
> Soiling it with virulent Negro stomach juices.
> Ma voice aint *classique!* (19)

Here, Clarke echoes the same violence that Marra points to in conveying the violent dissonance between colonial language and authentic language. Many contemporary black writers therefore attempt to "convey the experience of shock, incomprehension, and horror beyond language by working with textual difficulty and the systematic disruption of the comforts afforded by language and understanding" (Siemerling 25). In the case of Clarke's poem, "Language," the systematic disruption comes through semantic dissonance: the clashing ferocity imparted by the "b" words is an attempt to sound out an inauthentic English, but finds itself to be half-consumed and regurgitated through a blend of black English. It is thus neither authentic nor inauthentic – it is a continual negotiation of recovering. Authentic language and voice assumes a different mask

in theoretical discourse: *nation language*. Edward Kamau Brathwaite defines nation language – in a Caribbean context – by way of what it is not, through a list of negation:

> … we have English, which is the imposed language on much of the archipelago. It is an imperial language, as are French, Dutch and Spanish. We also have what we call creole English, which is a mixture of English and an adaptation that English took in the new environment of the Caribbean when it became mixed with the other languages. … Finally, we have the remnants of ancestral languages [Amerindian, Hindi, Chinese, and a variety of African models]. (5-6)

After a seemingly aggregate exclusion of all that those casually versed on the Caribbean cultural benchmarks would know, and an illustration of the multicultural mosaic that bears witness in such a climate, Brathwaite wedges in one commonly overlooked category from his long list of languages. This, which prior to his talk in 1979 was a virtually nonexistent term, is still English, yet is the *nation language*, it is the "language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors" (5-6). Here we find the crux of the problem: imperial, colonial assimilation leads to a dismissal of a large group of minority peoples that, by way of force, contributed to history. A distinct *nation language* therefore stems out of the "oral tradition" and is disseminated through "*total expression,*" which encompasses "not only the griot but the audience of the complete community" (Brathwaite 18). Clarke aligns the objective of his poetry to this extent, projecting the force of words beyond the page to a literary, and immediately local, community: "If I can't speak in the rhythms and nuances, use the diction and vocabulary, of the people I grew up with, then what am I saying – they are not worth anything, that the way they speak is a nullity in the world?" (Clarke qtd. in Compton 161).

One may trace echoes in Clarke's condemnation for high diction and preference for "blackened English" in Brathwaite's explanation that a *nation language* is contoured by its "rhythm and timber, its sound explosions" (13). The voices of Africadian writers, Clarke declares, are steeped in their geographical place, and influenced by their diasporic movement:

> Their voices are tinged with saltwater and rum, gypsum dust and honey, anger and desire. They are voices which, despite their debt to West Africa, have also adopted the timbre of Elizabethan English, M'ikmaq, Gaelic, and French – the other tongues of the "Latin" country of Nova Scotia. These voices have arisen from the whispers and hints of song that still haunt many of the abandoned African Baptist churches in the countryside, the martyred Seaview United Baptist Church, and in the present pulpits and pews of some two-score Black churches in Nova Scotia. (*Fire on the Water* 10)

Voice tinged by saltwater is particularly present in poems such as "Ellington Tours Africville, Nova Scotia (1936)," wherein the oceanic elements of the Nova Scotian landscape demonstrate the nature of language:

> Listen:
> Water slams a cliff;
> chunks thud free – *blam!* –
> a gigantic clod crashes crushingly down;
> hits waves, aiiieeeees like an orgasm. (Clarke, *Canticles I* 390).

The churn of waves, like words rolling around one's mouth repetitively, releases the height of authentic language. In the above excerpt, keeping true to Ellington's jazzy composition, the emphatic "*blam!*" releases the speaker into alliteration and onomatopoeia – two rhetorical devices that uphold the oral features of African writing.

The difficulty pertaining to *Canticles I*, however, is that it is not entirely comprised of the voices of Africadian writers; rather, it lays canonical claim to Eurocentric writers, historical events and documents, and it is nuanced with prominent figures and dialects from the African diaspora. This accentuates Clarke's intention that the collection ultimately be a transnational project. Hues of black English permeate *Canticles I* in precise moments. By spilling black ink over the paper, such as in the poem "The Confession of Celia: A Missouri Slave, 1850," Clarke creates tension between standard English and black English: "To get sumpin outta Shakespeare, / ya gotta get thee to a plantation – / where *all* are products of *Damnation*" (70). Thus, the black and white dialogical realms intersect in order to demonstrate the rhetoric of resistance that forms a unique nation language. In the case of "*Composition* [it] is only white *Silence* – / Speech impediments – til black ink hisses, … / And eye and tongue meet on black latitudes" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 364). Due to the hyphenated status of African-Canadians, and other migrant members that consist of the African diaspora, the method of speech employed in *Canticles I* comes to resemble W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness, which lays claim that "[s]uch a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words" (246). But, because the African-Canadian encompasses "not just 'black' and Canadian, but also adherents to a region, speakers of an 'official' language …" and other heterogeneous features unique "national" origins, the African-Canadian consciousness is "not merely ' double consciousness,' but what [Clarke calls] poly-consciousness" (*Odysseys Home* 40). It is uncommon to find a poem in the collection that is written entirely in black English, but frequent to discover a blend between high diction and racial rhetoric. This is because it reflects the hyphenated nature of members of the African diaspora; they embody two nations, one of origin and one of exploitation.

While the task of inscribing black English into canonical and historical discourse is effectively through fictitious authorial accounts which are diasporic and polyvocal, perhaps the most compelling case of black English comes from Clarke, particularly when united with praise for Walcott's method. In the "Polemical 'Conclusion'" to *Canticles I (MMXVII)*, Clarke harks back to his own roots/routes that is neither wholly white nor black, but hyphenated:

> Am I Exhibit "A" in this regard?
>
> I'm hardly "black," and am somewhat "Native,"
> with a dragged-out, belly dredging laugh,
> and *Poetry* slagged, rightly, as "bombastic":
> My voice be a lot of bitter roaring, eh?
>
> Not to mention hoarse snorts
> thuddin pidgin English
> out ma mouth – (438)

Unlike the rest of the volume, here Clarke configures himself as a proponent of the Other. At a crossroads between the poet Clarke and the speaker Clarke, this section brings life to the conflict of writing black English and of establishing a poetic voice of the Africadian community.

Like Walcott, whose poetic reflects a complex hybrid of national origins, Clarke additionally "include[s] the Hegelian master-slave binary within Africadian poetics" (Fiorentino xiv). In the above excerpt, the perceptive reader will find African-American, English, and Native dialects, but, uniquely, a Canadian one, marked by the rhetorical exclamatory question, "eh?" As Kevin McNeilly explains, "Clarke provokes and challenges his readers' false comforts of culture, or of

language, or of race, all the while immersing us in a kind of verbal balm" (53). This is evidently true in representing the Canadian sphere of the African diaspora in *Canticles I*. As an epic by definition, and in alignment with Clarke's Africadian project, it could be assumed that Clarke voices a regional language; instead, what we find throughout the collection is a distinct *mélange* of multiple dialects and histories, which emphasize *Canticles I* as being a transnational project.

Chapter 3: A Diasporic Discourse and Transnational Ideology

This chapter interrogates the notion that traditional epic poetry explicitly presents nationalist undertones. Indeed, as Beissinger, Tylus, and Woford point out, the central emphasis on community tends to yield nationalist undertones in the epic as it "present[s] an encyclopaedic account of the culture that produced it" (2-3). Treating the epic as a national literature "is not far from treating a nation as a person to celebrating it as a national hero whose life has epic grandeur" (Kertzer 10). A few literary critics have at times considered George Elliott Clarke as being dedicated to nationalism, and more appropriately and frequently, regionalism. This is because, as Alexander Macleod explains "his poetry has helped reinscribe the collective experience of Black Nova Scotia into the larger official historical narrative of the Canadian nation" (235). Certainly, Clarke is indebted to the Canadian tradition as his critical and creative work excavates a cultural category that has long been diminished and disregarded: African-Canadian, or Africadian. As Jonathan Kertzer explains, "for the nationalistic writer, intent on realizing the dream of a nation-state, the historical narrative quickly turns visionary. History turns into myth" (Kertzer 11). However, the following chapter will demonstrate how Clarke rejects a strictly national epic and creates a diasporic map throughout *Canticles I* in order to conceive of this racial category in relation to transnational identities, thus situating Canada in Gilroy's Black Atlantic and chronicling a pervasive African-Canadian presence throughout critical moments in history. In making this claim, I link the topic of transnationalism with notions of postcolonialism. Here, I primarily consult a variety of essays included in Laura Moss' critical anthology, *Is Canada Postcolonial?: Unsettling Canadian Literature* and Rinaldo Walcott's *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada*. Both of these titles interrogate race and the act of (re)writing that appropriately pertain to the transnational epic.

As a transnational epic, Clarke's *Canticles I* echoes the works of his predecessors, namely M. NourbeSe Philip and Derek Walcott's individual projects, *Omeros* and *Zong!*, respectively, by way of establishing intertextual roots and routes. Richard Cavell points out that, in configuring these transnational roots/routes, "the abstraction of the 'nation' is the guarantor of both the local (in its situatedness) and the global (in that nations represent an alliance of strangers)" (89). Connecting these three poets not only illuminates how literary canons and historical archives are evoked to recover silenced voices within a postcolonial, and perhaps postmodern, epic mode, but also helps to bring Clarke's transnational project into greater relief. As Robert Budde articulates in his essay "After Postcolonialsim: Migrant Lines and the Politics of Form," the poetics of postcolonial authors such as Philip and Clarke possess the "potential to cause a wholesale re-thinking of the Canadian cultural 'mosaic'" as they create techniques of racialization to critique the canon while participating in it (285). Arun Mukherjee further explains in "Ironies of Colour in the Great White North: The Discursive Strategies of Some Hyphenated Canadians," postcolonial poets "create parodies of the dominant discourse to indicate that its tonalities of glory, or patriotism, or moral superiority rub them the wrong way" (71). As explored in the previous chapter, this postulates a site of rhetorical difference; however, it also brands Canadian culture at large as being between Western and non-Western realms by exploring the hyphenated nature of many Canadian identities. At the heart of the problem with consolidating the two, Clarke writes in "White Like Canada" that the "vagueness of black identity in Canada … is emblematic of a larger crisis of Canadian identity": expounding the Canadian identity comes through a rejection of the American identity (73). "Understanding the black reality in Canada must start with the recognition that Canada's black population," writes Cecil Foster, "isn't a carbon copy of the African-American population south of the border" (13).

But, as Clarke argues in *Odysseys Home*, it isn't so much a reliance or emphasis on African-American culture to situate the African-Canadian experience, but rather a mode of relationality between the two.

Beyond the fluid border that Clarke evokes between America and Canada in *Canticles I* and many of his other creative works, there is a necessary evocation of transnational linkages. This is because, as Ayanna Black posits in the introduction to *Voices: Canadian Writers of African Descent*, African-Canadians "write out of a collective African consciousness," which is inclusive of the various routes of the African diaspora (xi). Writers such as Walcott, Philip, and Clarke engage in border crossing and depend "upon a different kind of Black diaspora sensibility, one that is larger than national boundaries can contain" (Rinaldo Walcott, "The Desire to Belong" 62). Since the distinct category of African-Canadian was "never spoken before the 1970s, it was not conceived as any coherent articulation of national culture(s). Rather, it was viewed as a provisional assembly of texts by […] people who 'happened to be Black' and 'happened to be in Canada'" (Clarke, *Odysseys Home* 7). In response, Clarke retraces and reroutes these roots in *Canticles I* to view African-Canadianism as part of the African diaspora panoptic catalogue. This becomes evident as the reader scans the poems contained within the two volumes of *Canticles I* and finds distinct mention of distant regions such as the Congo, Ethiopia, and the Antilles.

The first question that might be asked is, if *Canticles I* is overwhelmingly transnational in scope, then how does Clarke prominently configure Canada within it, especially if it is to be categorized as an African-Canadian epic? One answer may be found in the preface to *Trans.Can.Lit*, where Smaro Kamboureli defines Canadian literature as both "a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonial legacies" and as "a literature that has assumed transnational

and global currency" and is marked – in a contemporary context – by the spaces made for "diasporic voices" (vii). Laura Moss reiterates this statement in "Is Canada Postcolonial? Introducing the Question," when she posits that "Canada's national identity … still relies on the emphasis placed on the 'basic similarities' and/or the 'wide contrasts and local differences' of colonial, neo-colonial, and postcolonial histories, locations, and cultures" (1). These two critics underscore the way in which Canada as a nation – including its literature – is continually informed by way of its linkages to multiple nations. If one was to envision Clarke's own answer to such a question about how an African-Canadian epic might be transnational, it might be drawn from his interview, "The Crime of Poetry: George Elliott Clarke in Conversation with Wayde Compton and Kevin McNeilly":

> …the difference is that here, one's ethnicity, national origin, home, root, culture still continue to have some prominence, and some importance, so one may easily identify oneself as being Somalian or Ethiopian or Trinidadian, as opposed to being Canadian, or as opposed to being African Canadian. (58)

Perhaps it is not so much as an antagonism to a Canadian identity, but an identification that these origins diversify and enrich the Canadian multicultural mosaic and resist a single hyphenation. For example, M. NourbeSe Philip is often regarded as falling under the umbrella of African-Canadian literature, but in reality, she is Trinidadian-Canadian. Therefore, many of the narrative voices presented in *Canticles I* emphasize their regional aspects – such as the Maritimes – especially since Clarke asserts that "black Canadian writing is as regional as Canadian writing in general" (qtd. in Wayde Compton 62). Postcolonial theory has developed more nuanced conceptions that shift the "emphasis from cohesion and unity to diversity and differentiation" which suggests that in Canada "the possibility of an intensified interest in regionalism as an

important element in constructing a more heterogeneous model of postcolonial writing" (Wyile 139). This is evident in *Whylah Falls*, as it explicates the history of Africadians in Nova Scotia, but complicated in *Canticles I,* as regionalism implies a multitude of transatlantic regions.

There are few poems contained in both volumes of *Canticles I* that demonstrate explicitly nationalist Canadian themes; instead, there are many wherein Canadian referents pepper the language or are figured into the transnational content. One of the many ways in which Canada comes to be incorporated into the volumes is through the evocation of slavery. In regards to Canada's own history of slavery, it has often been forgotten that the nation's soil once harbored Africans as captives.[6] Canada burnishes its reputation as the Underground Railroad's central station, and prides itself in its progressiveness of abolishing slavery as compared to our neighbours to the south. Clarke explicitly states that his overall project tries to "address those national myths [namely Canadian slavery] that we tell ourselves, for the fundamental purpose of making ourselves seem better than Americans" (qtd. in Wayde Compton 55). As the speaker of the poem "Marathon" asserts, "*Location* is Yankee *Affliction*, / but *Healing*, if it's Canada…" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 79). This cheery conception of Canadian history is fraught with ignorance, which is why Clarke teases it out in *Canticles I*. The *MMXVII* volume is particularly keen in marking the tension between Canada as an idyllic utopia and Canada as a place of concealed racism and slave practices. For example, the poem "Escape to th'Escarpment!" details the narrative of a slave's movement from America to Canada through pastoral imagery. The journey is haphazard if not treacherous, as the escaping slaves "collide into rapids" and "cross scissoring torrents" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 72; 73). While the depths of the waters the slaves travel through are

[6] In "White Like Canada," Clarke details that a nation-wide poll conducted by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association in 1995 found that eighty-three percent of adults in Canada were unaware of slavery practices in pre-Confederation Canada until 1834.

complacent to movement, it provides a sort of racial, biblical cleansing to dispel the title of "slave" from the African-American individual: "discard blood-crust darkness / … Niagara rapids come sticky / whitewash, a nigger baptism, frankly" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 72). Niagara Falls marks the site of border crossing and the slaves' new homeland:

> We envisioned this verge –
>
> falling into Upper Canada,
> out the virgin ocean, Erie,
> lime-fresh swells at the start,
> the high-tide pummeling,
> …
> till we come up, resurrected (Clarke, *Canticles I* 73).

The structure of this passage alone asynchronously bridges the tidal movement of Niagara Falls to that of the slaves' escape: on the "verge" of two borders, falling into one by falling out of another. The idyllic natural imagery of Canada is further maintained through the images of hope and home: "Home to a domain of black maple / and wine, cut out of shadows, / … Emerge into a Platonic sun" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 74). As the poem concludes, the reader is given a sense that Canada is the land of "light," one furnished with placid natural and social attributes: "At this frontier, surf and sand / conduct tender dialogue – / gold overlapping gold" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 74). The following poem, "Voice of the Fugitive (1851)," paints a very different picture of life in Canada: the ex-slaves now belong to "A Republic of clotting blow upon blow, / A Democracy of unknotted whips" – in a sense, a different type of enslavement – one that is to a national culture (Clarke, *Canticles I* 76). As Fanon notes, "the national government in its dealing with the

country people as a whole is reminiscent of certain features of the former colonial power," thus recolonizing the individual under the premise of establishing a national culture (*Wretched* 117).

The link between colonial power and a national culture is apparent in the poem "Pamphlet to the Electors of Canada West (1856)." While the prior two poems that come before it in the *MMXVII* volume envision Canada as home – as a geographical oasis for the escaped slave – this poem presents a much harsher reality of life post-emancipation in economic and political terms. The speaker, assigned to Judge T.C. Haliburtan, who was a prominent political figure in Nova Scotia prior to its entry into the Confederation of Canada, opens by continuing the notion that those slaves who have settled in Canada are in continual exile as they are linked to Napoleon Bonaparte (nick-named 'Boney'): "The ex-States ex-slaves / are only as 'fugitive' as was 'Boney'" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 112). The emancipated African-American slaves' movement to Canada is regarded as an invasion, described as "blackamoors barging into Canada West / (Upper Canada), hankering for *Liberty*" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 112). Here, Clarke provides the reader with glimpses into the imagined, and perhaps historical, condemnation for ex-slaves in the early history of Canada. The ex-slaves are mocked "where, 'free at last,' as they so chortle," is a phrase surmised by political leaders as simple "minstrel rabble" (*Canticles I* 112). The act of national power means that "The Colony's rulers must pare down / the specious vermin" through acts of violence:

> Better that they – the bewilderedly – moulder
> in some hollow, frozen edifice –
> a tomb, a sepulcher, a sarcophagus,
> with a drapery of leaves, peelings, vines, moss.

Or, let em be tied so much by *Lynch Law*,

they strangle –

as they stampede. (Clarke, *Canticles I*, 113; 114)

In this excerpt, Clarke excavates the disdain for ex-slaves migrating into Canada by providing them with colonial burial sites – either fearfully trapped within the frigid terrain or hung on display *par example*. Of the former, Clarke explains in "White Like Canada" that the "one inescapable fact of Canadian life – the inevitable, constituting myth of Canadianness – is the nation's frigid vastness" (107). Further, Clarke reveals the seedy underbelly of pre-national power through the act of imaginative political documents, and dismisses the myth that within the dominion of Canada, lynchings were non-existent. As Fanon explains, "[v]iolence in the colonies does not only have for the its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours" (*Wretched* 14). The succession of poems that explicitly name Canada, such as "Escape to th'Escarpment!," "Voice of the Fugitive (1851)," and "Pamphlet to the Electors of Canada West (1856)" thus reveals its regression from being regarded as a place of utopia and freedom to one that revels in oppressive practices.

In order to situate the African-Canadian experience, George Elliott Clarke retains Canada's interrelation with America in *Canticles I*, specifically in conveying narratives of migration North during the antebellum period. As such, *Canticles I* strictly rejects the classification of being a national epic as it comprehensively links the history of a particular people – namely African-Canadians – to the imperial practices imposed by multiple nations. By linking the African-Canadian experience with the larger experiences of diasporic movement, Clarke echoes Lily Cho's claim that "minority discourse calls for an understanding of minority

communities as defined relationally through and with each other" (98). A suitable example wherein we can place this claim is located in the poem, "James Madison Bell in 'Canada' (1865)." First, Clarke makes the reader aware of the cosmopolitan nature of Bell in a footnote explaining that he was an African-American poet who briefly resided in Canada. As Eleanor Ty affirms in "Representing 'Other' Diasporas in Recent Global Canadian Fiction," the sense of the cosmopolitan, along with the "multiply-located and multiply-centred narratives," makes such works global (101). The connection between Canada and America is most prominently configured in this poem and subsequent poems through the border that the two nations share running through Niagara Falls. As the speaker Bell says, his "leap cross Niagara, / marked a tumultuous gesture – / to slip free Uncle Sam's / ulcerating shackles" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 214). America is commonly referred to in the poems of *Canticles I* through the figure of Uncle Sam, which represents imperial power. In opposition, pre-confederate Canada is represented by its placid natural qualities and environmental personification:

> The starry sky shouted –
>
> Great Lake halloed –
>
> "You're landed;
>
> you're grounded;
>
> here you can be rooted." (Clarke, *Canticles I* 214)

Ironically, the speaker, Bell, is freed from one nation's shackle and confined by another. This is because, as Donna Palmateer Pennee asserts, "'there is no question of doing without the national; it is rather a matter of doing the national differently. For diasporas do not come from nor do they travel through and exist in thin air, nor do citizenships. They *are grounded* even if not always

landed'" (my emphasis, qtd. in Cho 96). Canada is erected in the poem by way of the dismemberment of America:

> The Republic is as shifty as an earthquake.
>
> … No wonder the States convulsed
>
> and split into warring halves,
>
> ending only in attenuated shambles… (Clarke, *Canticles I* 215)

The simultaneous rejection of American culture and reinforcement of its shared border with Canada is attenuated in the diasporic movement North. The kinder social conditions of Canada are thus contrasted with the unfavourable ones in the United States during the antebellum period. For example, in the poem "Letter of Jourdon Anderson," the speaker juxtaposes the social and economic climate of the two nations to highlight a difference in their national culture:

> Now, I'm doubtful that my requested return to your employ and lodgings would be good for me, for your son, Jack, intends to shoot me should I grant him myself as target. In contrast, Canada West is tolerably good. I earn $25 per month, and am supplied clothing, victuals, tools, and books. (Clarke, *Canticles I* 217)

The period of increased globalization comes with an interest in higher commodification. Here, Clarke stresses the relationship between social and economic freedom. This, and the fluid border between Canada and America, are further emphasized when then speaker says, "I urge you to send us the cash owing, by express mail train, and address your envelope to Mr. Ivor Winters, LLB, of Windsor, Canada West, in U.S. denominations (everywhere negotiable in Canada)" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 219).

Besides its inextricable connection to the United States, Canada is also considered in *Canticles I* in its connection with Britain, since, after confederation, it falls under the British

monarchy. The portrait of the head of the monarchy illustrates imperial British power in the poem, "On Queen Victoria":

> She is a black-decked hen
> brooding in a nest of nettles,
> given to furtive fooping
> of English cocks all crowing,
> and clucking to swallow more of Africa,
> more of Asia,
> more of th'Americas,
> the two Indies,
> and even more of *Europa*
> more and more and more. (Clarke, *Canticles I* 224)

Since the poem is attributed to the authorship of Karl Marx, the poem provides a Marxist critique on the monarchy – the collection of "more" countries, of "more" colonization – of which Canada necessarily falls under. The monarchy is used to give strength to the notion of national unity as its empire exploits and colonizes other nations. Marx's final blow to the monarchy is on the antiquity of its practice, since "[h]er empire is cannons barking scripture / in Gothic lettering" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 225). Here, Clarke devises double meaning by referring to empirical rule as both the military cannon and literary canon, and demonstrates how it subsumes other national cultures through the colonization of its land.

Exploitation of the colonies is further explored through transatlantic destinations and detours. In thinking about the connectedness of diasporic cultures, Rinaldo Walcott in *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada*, uses the metaphor of the detour since "[d]etours are the

(un)acknowledged routes and roots of black expressive cultures and gesture directly to their rhizomatic nature. The detour is both an improvisority and an in-between space which black diasporic cultures occupy" (32). The primary imagery that Clarke employs in exploring diasporic detours comes through narratives of the transatlantic slave trade. These interactions and transactions of peoples is listed in catalogue-style in the poem, "Ports Négriers Européens":

> Liverpool (4894 voyages)
>
> Londres (2704 voyages = fount of Shakespeare's lingo)
>
> Bristol (2064 voyages)
>
> Nantes (1714 voyages)
>
> Zeland (688 voyages)
>
> Bordeaux (480 voyages)
>
> Le Havre (451 voyages)
>
> La Rochelle (448 voyages = launch pad for Quebec)
>
> Saint-Malo (218 voyages; & the spider-hole of artier, that pirate who "bagged" Canada for France)
>
> Amsterdam (210 voyages)
>
> Honfleur (314 voyages)
>
> Lisbonne (92 voyages)
>
> *Etc.*
>
> Cadix (39 voyages) (Clarke, *Canticles I* 275)

As an identifying feature of the epic mode, Clarke uses a list as the poetic structure to demonstrate the sheer abundance of transatlantic passages of slaves to their respective European ports. Using the historical precedent of the catalogue, the poem maps the non-exhaustive

movement of African slaves and places them distinctly within the continent of Europe – and *vis-à-vis* Canada, as two of the French ports (La Rochelle and Saint-Malo) double for Quebec cities in their naming and facilitation for trade.

In another exploration of the detour, the poem "Flight from The Congo" situates a Canadian port that is linked to the transatlantic slave trade – one that is located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. As the speaker, William G. Stairs, a Canadian-British colonizer, details, it is perhaps by chance that they land in the Maritimes: "carried thither by tatters of foam, / we swished into Halifax harbor, / blurred by fog" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 287). Stairs clarifies that he and his crew would prefer the amicable climate of the Maritimes, regardless of whether or not it is labeled "*New Darkness* / or 'Nova Scotia'" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 288). What exactly is this "*New Darkness*" that he refers to? Explicitly, it mirrors Joseph Conrad's infamous novel on colonization in the Congo: *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In keeping with Stairs' task of colonization, he says that he wants to "forget anchorage in a Congo river" and with it, forget that his role is synonymous with that of "Mr. Joey Conrad (English-parleying Pole)" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 289). The women who reside in Halifax are placed in romantic terms, with their "bod[ies] as honest as honey – / with skin rose-pink," while the Nigerian woman the crew exploits in the Congo is sampled as a "damp, trampled camp follower" with "scorched tits" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 289). The darkness of the violent sexual acts conducted in the Congo is carried over into the "*New Darkness*" of Halifax. Colonization is thus steeped in Canada's history, and the violence of people and exploitation of women of the Congo are further carried into the dominion's soil: "About-face we went, / to retrace the shadowy passage, … with a cargo of corpse-usurping flies"; "Halifax is … hallowed belles / (hollow where it counts), comfy" (Clarke, *Canticles I* 291). Simultaneously, Clarke connects a deep history of colonization and

exploitation in Africa to Canada, while finding the narrative's twin rooted in that of the English canon.

To return to the initial chapter on the distinctive features of the epic mode, Clarke uses the descent to the underworld in the poem "Darwin's Editorial on East African Slavery" by way of the haunted Atlantic to re-inform cultural memory. Eleanor Ty explains that the works of "recent Canadian writers deterritorialize and reimagine diasporic identities, at the same time as they reterritorialize aspects of cultural memory" (112). The sea as a site of deterritorialization is a poignant concept; it processes the actuality of the acts of oppression through salt erosion (in most cases, the cast-off of African bodies) and the disregard of the oppressor through the continuous movement by way of water. Further, in following suit of Philip's mode of "rooting the poem in the water and in the law with the names literally beneath it or outside it," the ambiguous persons cast into the ocean become rooted through their route (Fehskens 415). Clarke capitalizes on this in the poem "Darwin's Editorial on East African Slavery":

> I remember a coffle of blathy beings,
> plopping, one by one,
>
> into murk, dark as night-steeped mud,
> while vessel boards squeaked wretchedly,
>
> as African took his, her, bitter step,
> down into unfathomable, liquid *Hades*.
>
> Disappeared they

like a torrent of shadows.

The manhandled “livestock”
took together their plunging,

each one drowning, chained,
in succession,

their legs and feet attempting gallops,
except they had no purchase on this surface

or, rather, *Immersion*:
it was a submarine,

seafloor platform,
they could only reach as bones. (Clarke, *Canticles I* 228)

Rendered as unprofitable commodities, the Africans, like those in Philip’s epic text, *Zong!*, are preserved by the saltwater and become everlasting reminders of the atrocities inflicted during the transatlantic slave trade. While they do not remain on “this surface” (otherwise considered as the solid ground of earth), they nonetheless are highlighted by Clarke as contributing to the diasporic map of African heritage.

Admittedly, this chapter runs the risk of analysis that Clarke cautions in *Odysseys Home*: “no analysis of African-Canadian literary nationalism will proceed far that is only interested in

painstakingly isolating 'black' elements in texts, for the 'Canadian must also be scrutinized" (189). However, Clarke's above statement is noteworthy as it seeks to criticize Canada from the centre in order to look outwards. In turn, *Canticles I* rejects a strictly nationalistic portrayal and the ongoing collection is instead emblematic of Clarke's transnational ideology. African-Canadian scholar David Sealy supports a separation from the centre of singular national identities, as not doing so eludes the diversity of black diasporic histories, along with "the diverse ways in which Black diasporic subjects have selectively appropriated, incorporated, European ideologies, culture, and institutions, alongside an 'African' heritage" (91). He, like Clarke, understands that "the search for an originary univocal 'Black' source precludes the plurivocality of 'blackness'" (Sealy 91). As Kathy-Ann Tan summarizes in *Reconfiguring Citizenship and National Identity in the North American Literary Imagination*, Clarke claims that "there is no single unifying sovereign nation-state of Canada but a multiplicity of Canada*s*" (100). As such, *Canticles I* envisions Canada's composition by way of the distinct national consciousness of African-Canadians through new temporal routes and roots.

Conclusion

The partial container of this thesis' title, which is "slave over epic," comes from the poem "Extro: Reverie & Reveille" and speaks not only to the painstaking effort on the part of the reader of deciphering epic poetry, but it also refers to the labour of inscribing the particular history of the African diaspora into the larger body of canonical and historical literature by the poet. Indeed, George Elliott Clarke's creative and critical oeuvre has largely participated in this project, with *Canticles I* serving as the most recent addendum. As Arun Mukerhjee posits in the essay, "Canadian Nationalism," the "old paradigms of nationalist criticism and the white-only canon no longer convince all Canadians. Nor does the master narrative of two founding races / places / peoples / cultures" (167). In this regard, *Canticles I* can be conceived as usurping traditional, dominant discourses in order to position African-Canadians within a larger web of relationality to multiple places.

As an epic by nature and definition, *Canticles I* participates in the genealogy of the epic tradition, which is to say that it takes up many of its identifying features – such as the descent of the underworld, beginning *in media res*, and evoking the *aiodos*. However, the uniqueness of *Canticles I* lies in the way in which the text adapts these features to suit the postcolonial, and African-Canadian, project. As a scholar, Clarke is clearly influenced by both canonical and minority authors, as evident in his evocation of Ezra Pound, Derek Walcott, and M. NourbeSe Philip in *Canticles I*. The substantial focus on polyvocal and polyphonic voices demonstrates the larger web of relationality, as it evokes both canonical and minority voices. Lyricism in this context functions to enact a profound destabilization of hegemonic control through vernacular rhetoric and formal techniques of interjection, such as heteroglossia, mimicry, and signifying. Such rhetorical techniques elucidate Clarke's "poetics of resistance" and inscribe the Other into

the total catalogue of canonical and historical discourses through authoritative voice. Language therefore functions in the poems of *Canticles I* to critique typical representations of the African diaspora, particularly by employing Derek Walcott's notion of black English. As Clarke explains, "African/Black Canadian literature truly *arrives* as the consequence of braze, authoritarian, unilateral, retroactive, self-conscious, and defensive (offensive?) annunciation of a canon and chronology" ("Archive" 43-44). Since Clarke condemns other epic texts for the national paradigms they present – particularly in the classic epics of Homer and the modernist epic of Pound – he instead positions Canada within its broader transnational interactions. As a result, other nations' acts of imperial history and injustice shed light on Canada's long disregarded history of slavery through their connections and routes established through diasporic movement.

It is worth reiterating here that *Canticles I* is presently composed of two volumes: MMXVI and MMXVII. Additionally, Clarke's epic project is certainly not in its complete form; it is anticipated that the two other "Testaments" will be released in the coming years. This thesis is therefore meant to set the foundation for future scholarship on the ongoing collection and serve as the precedent for further inquiry on the flexible nature of the African-Canadian epic. Given that Testament II will engage in (re)readings of scriptures of the African diaspora, and Testament III will trace the creation of African Baptist Association churches in Nova Scotia, supplemental research on the project's emphasis on transnationalism in relation to Canada might be required.

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